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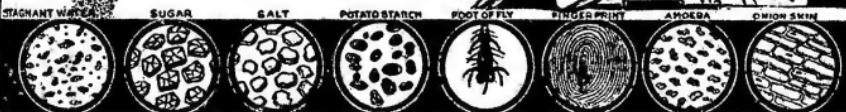
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MARVEL TALES

Vol. 2, No. 1



May, 1940

★ ★ ★ EERIE BOOK-LENGTH HORROR NOVEL ★ ★ ★

Mistress of Machine-Made Madness.....by Nils O. Sonderlund Page 8

The ghastly flare of the SUBTERRANE'S disruptor disk thrust Weston Craig back four years to rendezvous with Ann Tancred's stark loveliness, and neither the brain-spanning scope of the mad scientist's metal mole nor the lusting devices of the fiend, could now salvage the world's greatest new industry and crown Ann queen of Satan's underground empire!

★ ★ ★ 4 BREATH-TAKING NOVELETTES ★ ★ ★

World Without Sex.....by Robert O. Wentworth 41

In twenty-four hours the male sex would end, the last male in the world would be dead—unless Rann Haddan faced the ruling females with the tactics his forefathers had used four thousand years ago!

The Test-Tube Monster.....by George E. Clark 55

This test-tube creature was no mere miracle of ultra-science, this was the most beautiful girl Graeme Mansfield had ever known, and he'd sell his soul to hell before he'd yield her to the test-tube monster who chose her as his mate!

Princess of Power.....by Frederic A. Kummer, Jr. 72

Here was Targash, mightiest of the seven kingdoms of evil and tyranny, here was Zora, Princess of Power!... Aye, Ulf the Northman could have his conquest now, could claim this sin-lorn land for its own fear-frozen people, could claim the lovely Zora for his bride!

Fresh Fiances for the Devil's Daughter.....by Russell Gray 87

The unholy lust, the unspeakable orgies, the hideous tortures would have sufficed to damn my soul—but this vampire luring me worshiped evil, enshrined it, until virtue was to be despised, and vileness was all I lived for!

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No.

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CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN AND THE WHIP

SHRIEKING with terror, and quite aware of her complete nudity, Ann Tancred appeared in a second-story window. The weird greenish glare of the laboratory conflagration

MISTRESS OF

Yawning in the side of the old brick house was a round, four-foot hole—as perfectly circular as if it had been cut out with a monster punch. Uncanny greenish flame was gushing out of it, and from the explosion-shattered doors and windows on the ground floor.

The fire department, as usual in the sleepy little university town, was late.



Gigantic in the moonlight, the brute came close behind her, his

spotlighted the full roundness of her young breasts.

In the laundry truck that he drove to pay for his engineering course, Weston Craig rounded the street corner and came upon the scene. Amazement drove his foot against the brakes.

Singed and smoking from the accident, Professor Tancred was running back and forth in the street. A lean little wisp of a man, he reminded Craig of an excited ant. He was babbling frantically:

"The disk—it's out of control! My

MACHINE-AGE MADNESS

Like blood-drenched gravestones were those Subterrane signposts to Satan's underground empire, and Weston Craig would transcend the brain-spanning scope of the mad scientist's deadly disruptor disk to salvage Ann Tancred's stark loveliness from the fiend's lustful devices, and secure for the world of tomorrow modern science's greatest invention!

precious disk!" Keen enough to win the Nobel prize in physics, his mind seemed to have deserted him. "My notes! My daughter! My disk! Some-

possibilities of the invention.

The disk would liberate atomic power, to run all the world's industry. It would manufacture neutronium out



serpent-like whip snatching at her clothing, slaying her flesh

body—do something!"

Craig guessed what had happened. He was student assistant in Tancred's physics laboratory classes. He had helped wire the weird-looking atomic disruptor disk, and he had listened to hours of Tancred's ravings about the

of the disrupted atoms—a wonder-substance, a million times stronger than steel. It would bore mines to incredible depths, cut tunnels under the oceans.

So the excited little scientist had promised.

Just now, however, something seemed

EMPIRE AND THE HANDMAIDEN FROM HELL LUST CROWNED ITS QUEEN!

to have gone very much wrong with the wonderful new invention. It was time indeed, Craig saw, for somebody to do something.

For an instant his eyes clung to the screaming nude girl in the window. Ann Tancred was just sixteen. He had regarded her only as a dark-eyed, dark-haired little mouse of a freshman. But the slim softness of her young body kindled something in him.

His foot went from brake to accelerator. The laundry truck veered across the lawn, beneath the deadly thrust of the disintegrating ray. Narrowly missing the frantic scientist, Craig backed it against the burning building.

He scrambled to the top of it, beneath the window where Ann was leaning out. The choking green chemical smoke was now pouring out above her head. Pain added terror to her screams. Still unconscious of her nakedness, she threw herself down into Craig's arms.

Her slender body was still cool and dripping from the shower she'd been taking when the explosion had surprised her. They both fell off the truck, and sprawled together on the lawn.

"Oh—" she gasped at him. "Thank you—for saving my life!"

They got up. The girl turned away from Craig, trying to cover her breasts with small hands. Craig draped her with a bath towel that he grabbed from the truck. Slim and long-limbed in the green glare of the ray, she ran away from him, toward a neighbor's house.

That was Commencement week, four years ago now. The disruption ray had sliced through trees and a neighbor's roof. There were damage suits, and Professor Tancred left the university, to carry on his experiments in a more secluded place.

CRAG graduated, and became a fellow in the engineering department. He received several letters from Tan-

cred, postmarked somewhere in Arizona, requesting him to look up data or buy pieces of equipment.

Craig wrote a few times to Ann. He received no answer. The girl, he guessed, had not recovered from her embarrassment. But he could not forget her.

Then came the last, strange appeal from her father. The frantic phrases of the scientist's letter haunted Craig:

My dear Weston:

Come to us—for God's sake!

You will be interested to know that the disruptor disk, after all these years and disappointments, is at last perfected. I am installing the completed model on a new boring machine. I know that the *Subterrane* will accomplish all that I have dreamed of.

The new "mole," as we call it, can carry us down through Earth's crust, to the mother lode of all treasure. The years of poverty and effort can soon be ended. We can all be millionaires—billionaires —there is no limit!

But we need you, Weston. All my years of work may lead only to tragic disaster, unless you come to aid us. For I have reason to mistrust my present associate—Dr. Hugh Maddrey.

Ann is afraid of Maddrey. She believes the promise of unimaginable wealth is transforming him into a madman. He is certainly becoming more and more violent. I must have the Mexican cook take this letter out, without his knowledge.

For Ann's sake, Weston—come at once!

Desperately,
TANCRED

Craig wondered about the *Subterrane*. He had always been a little skeptical of Tancred's invention. And the

letter sounded half crazy to him. Craig had no desire for millions. But he did need money for a new cyclotron.

And, across four years, memory of Ann Tancred's long, full-breasted nude body, still tantalized him. He locked up his laboratory and caught the next plane west.

The bus that he had to take from Phoenix stopped at a dusty, sun-faded ghost town at the desert's edge. Craig told the wrinkled, sun-blackened man at the gas pump:

"I'm looking for old Professor Tancred. Know him?"

The man stared, letting gasoline run on the ground. Craig saw the shadow of fear darken the deep-sunken eyes. Suspicious mistrust brought the thin, sun-parched lips together like the jaws of a trap.

"What's the matter?" Craig demanded. "Don't you know Tancred?"

The wrinkled desert rat stopped the wasting gas. He stepped back from Craig, his eyes narrowed watchfully.

"Know him well enough," he muttered. "Him and that devil, Maddrey!" The words jerked out, violently. "That Maddrey—he's a coyote! A hydrophobia-skunk!"

"I don't know Maddrey," Craig said, "Where does Tancred live?"

"In that devil's den!" The man spat the words. "If you got to go there—get off the bus at the mail box, twenty miles up. You'll see the road. And you'll meet Maddrey!"

The sun was low when the bus left Craig at the mail box. There was no one waiting—he had decided not to send a telegram, lest it fall into the dreaded hands of Maddrey.

The box stood on its post alone in the middle of a vast sweep of barren mesa. There was no tree or house in view. Craig could see no living thing—until he saw an ominous black bird wheeling, far away south.

He looked at the box again. Black-lettered on the side of it was the name, *Dr. Hugh Maddrey*. Above was a thin smear of wet red paint. Dimly, through it, Craig could read Tancred's name.

He shuddered, and his fingers groped unconsciously for the heavy little automatic that he had bought in Phoenix. Suddenly Craig wished that he had a more formidable weapon—and knew more about its use.

He found two narrow wheel tracks that led straight south across the sere brown vegetation of the mesa. They ran between the monument-like sandstone buttes that towered here and there, and on toward the black wheeling bird.

Only now there were three of the birds.

Uneasily, Craig started walking south, along the dusty tracks. He couldn't help wanting to turn back toward the safety of his laboratory, where problems could be solved with a slide rule, and uncertainties checked in a test tube.

Always, Weston Craig had led a sheltered life. Always he had been afraid, even of fear itself. Sometimes he had spurred himself to reckless feats. But he had never conquered fear, and he thought he never would.

Now his whole body was tensed and goose-fleshed with an intuition of monstrous peril waiting for him. His throat was dry. A cool wind of evening sprang up across the desert, and suddenly he was shivering to the chill sweat of fear.

But he plodded ahead, gripping the little gun with sticky fingers. He had trained himself to go ahead, in spite of fear. Once, he remembered, he had saved Ann Tancred's life—with no thought of fear.

He knew that he would risk a great deal for her, again.

He counted the black specks again, that wheeled in the sunset sky ahead.

Now there were seven. He remembered reading how the desert's carrion birds will gather above anything dead. Was their object just a rabbit or a coyote, he wondered. Or—something larger?

THE face of the desert changed, as the sun dropped lower. The naked buttes became pillars of ominous red—they were like blood-drenched grave-stones, Craig thought, in a giants' cemetery. Purple light flowed up, and drowned the red. And a dust-red moon rose beyond them.

Craig's feet were getting sore. Still he could see no sign of any habitation. He began to wonder how much farther it could be to whatever dwelling or laboratory Tancred and his alarming assistant had established here—and abruptly he stopped.

Listening.

It came from far ahead, an unfamiliar sound. It had the drumming quality of a powerful aero engine. But Craig could find no light in the moon-flooded sky. And he had a curiously disturbing impression that the roaring came from *beneath*.

The ground seemed to quiver, under his aching feet. He dropped his ear to a boulder, and the sound was louder. A quivering tension drew upon his nerves. His heart began to skip.

But it couldn't be—not Tancred's *Subterrane!*

Then he stared at the base of a purple butte, half a mile ahead. There was a flare of greenish flame—that carried him instantly back four years, to that laboratory accident and the memory of Ann Tancred's naked childish loveliness.

The flame died, and something burst out of the rock. A bulky, clumsy-looking metal thing, shining dully in the moonlight. It rocked ponderously on massive caterpillar tracks, and came sliding down a talus slope.

It was cylindrical, except for the tracks. It looked a little bit like a submarine, with conning tower and other obstructions removed. Except the nose of it, that was a palely glowing greenish disk.

That was a disruptor disk, a huge copy of the one he had helped Tancred wire. This strange machine was Tancred's "metal mole!" The *Subterrane!*

A small dark opening appeared in the side of it. Craig glimpsed two small figures moving swiftly. The machine, he realized, must be far larger than he had at first thought.

That mighty drumming had ceased. Now another sound ripped through the moonlight—a scream, torn by the fangs of agony from a woman's throat!

Crack!

For an instant Craig was puzzled by that sharp, rifle-like report. But it came again. And he knew, from the shriek that followed, that it was the sound of a whip.

Chill apprehension prickled along Craig's spine. He wished that he had taken time to practice with the little automatic. But he went forward, at a weary, stumbling run, and met the screaming girl.

Long-legged and slender, she came fleetly across the mesa. Cruel mesquite and poisoned Spanish Bayonet ripped at her clothing. The full moon caught the flash of a smooth white thigh, and gleamed on the full roundness of a naked breast—and it was black on the whip's bleeding tracks.

Crack!

Gigantic in the moonlight, the man came close behind her. A bull-huge brute, black-haired, black-bearded. His breath was a hoarse bestial gasping. The whip ran through his hands and leapt out in the moonlight, a thin black serpent striking.

The girl shrieked again, and Craig knew the intonation of her voice. Four

years had filled out her straight body with the lush curves of womanhood. But she was Ann Tancred.

Craig lifted the inadequate little automatic, shouted hoarsely:

"Hold on—you, there!"

THAT sounded silly. He knew that he should have shot first. But then, unused to weapons, he might have endangered the girl as much as the man.

The girl checked herself. Her dark eyes grew wide in the moonlight. Her hands lifted instinctively to cover her nudity. Craig knew, from the odd little toss of her disheveled head, that she remembered their last meeting.

"Craig!" She gasped the warning. "It's Maddrey—watch him!"

The dark-featured, gigantic man came panting up beside her, trailing the whip. And Craig flinched before the eyes of Maddrey. They were blue against the moon, blazing—mad!

"Well—Mr. Engineer!"

The voice of Maddrey was a deep hollow bellow, again bull-like. Craig shuddered from it. And the old fear flowed like an icy liquid in his veins.

"I read Tancred's foolish letter, for the Mexican was my slave." It was an appalling, effortless roar. "And we've been waiting for you, Mr. Engineer. We may need you to repair the disruptor-disk, somewhere on the way.

"Because you are going with us, down to the center of the Earth!"

The girl came stumbling forward.

"No—no!"

Hoarse with fear, she flung quivering arms around Craig. Her firm breast brought him the rapid thud of her heart. He caught the perfume of her body.

"Oh, Weston—he'll kill you!"

Maddrey moved to follow the girl. The thin gleaming whip leapt forward like a live thing. Craig tried to ignore the fear shrieking in him. He thrust himself forward, lifted the little wob-

bling gun.

"Stand back!" he whispered.

He hardly saw the swift movement of Maddrey's big hand, in the moonlight. He had time to squeeze the trigger of the little gun, just once. But he knew the bullet was going wild.

And the tiny report was drowned in a thundrous crash. He saw the spurt of yellow fire from Maddrey's hip. Then crimson lightning splintered against his head. He felt the girl's frantic hands clinging to him, as he slipped down. He heard, far-off, her anguished scream:

"Don't! Don't! Not the whip!"

CHAPTER II

PASSAGE TO MADNESS

CRAIG came back to consciousness, lying in the dark. A dull wedge of agony was splitting his head. He fingered it, gingerly. Maddrey's bullet must have plowed a long furrow through his scalp. The wound had been roughly dressed, but the hair on his neck and the collar of his shirt were still stiff with dried blood.

He sat up stiffly, fumbled about. He was in a cramped little cell. There was no article of furniture. The walls were riveted metal. A flimsy metal ladder ran up one of them.

He would climb it, when he felt stronger.

The metal walls quivered to a deep, drumming roar. Craig felt an uneasy sense of swaying motion. It made him feel a little sick. The noise was like a hammer, pounding the wedge of agony in his brain.

He knew that he was a prisoner aboard the *Subterrane*.

Bound—

Where?

A sudden blade of blue light fell from

above, painful to his eyes. It widened to a shining pillar. A trap door was opening in the ceiling of riveted steel, above the ladder. Craig saw a woman's foot, a trim bare ankle.

Her skirt caught on the ladder. Smooth thighs flashed. Then the light was obscured, as she lowered the door back into place. Craig waited, again in utter darkness.

She touched the floor beside him. His nostrils caught the fragrance of her hair.

"Ann?" he whispered.

"Shhhh!" she warned. "Maddrey thinks I'm asleep. He told me not to come near you. If he finds me here, he'll whip me again." She shuddered. "Oh, Weston!"

"We must get away," Craig whispered.

She was trembling.

"But how can we?" Her voice was hoarse with dread. "We're on the *Subterrane*. Maddrey has been boring straight down with us, for hours." She clung to him. "We must be dozens of miles down!"

"Dozens of miles?" Craig shook his head, in the dark. "That would be impossible. Volcanic heat would roast us. The pressure would crush the machine!"

"But you helped poor Dad build the first disruptor disk," she protested. "You know the disrupted atoms form a neutronic film that lines the tunnel. It is less than a thousandth of an inch thick. But it doesn't conduct heat. And it's so dense that the weight of ordinary matter is nothing at all against it. It can stand thousands of tons, and thousands of degrees of heat!"

Craig was interested. The agony of his wound was forgotten for the moment, and their desperate plight. He was the engineer again.

"What about the power?" he asked.

"That comes from the disintegrated atoms," the girl told him. "Escaping

electrons are picked up by accumulators at the edges of the disk, to charge the batteries. There is power to spare, for the refrigerator and ventilator systems."

A sob of fear came back into her voice.

"Oh, Weston—what can we do?"

"Your father?" asked Craig. "Can't he help us?"

She shuddered in his arms.

"I'm afraid—about Dad," she whispered. "One day he was gone. Maddrey told me that he had been called suddenly to Washington, about the patents. But he would have surely waited to speak to me. I'm so afraid—"

She sobbed again. Craig remembered the buzzards wheeling above the desert. He was certain that Dr. Tancred had not gone to Washington.

"Twice I tried to run away," whispered the girl. "But Maddrey caught me, with the whip—" Her quivering hands felt cold. "He's mad—a monster!"

"We must try to overpower him," said Craig. "If we can get out of here, and find something to use for a weapon—"

SUDDENLY his voice seemed very loud, and he choked it off. The drumming of the machinery had stopped. Heavy steps rang on a metal deck above, approaching. The girl trembled against Craig, voiceless.

"Oh, Weston!" she sobbed. "He's coming—"

The door was flung open above. Blue light flooded them. Leaning weakly against the metal wall, with his arm about the shuddering girl, Craig looked up. He saw Maddrey's bull-like, black-bearded mass. One gigantic hairy hand gripped a big automatic. From the other trailed the whip.

"Well?" Maddrey's voice was a careless, triumphant bellow. "Mr. En-

gineer, I see that I must warn you, too. You are not to associate with my ward, Miss Tancred. You two must keep apart."

Craig stared up into Maddrey's black face. He tried to meet those cold, blazing blue eyes. They seemed to shake his very soul, with an insane and ruthless violence.

"Nonsense, Maddrey!" Craig's voice trembled, in spite of his effort to keep it steady. "You've got to turn back."

"Turn back, Mr. Engineer?" Maddrey's voice was as ruthless as the booming of an angry sea. "Turn back—when we are bound for the center of the Earth! Do you know what the core of the Earth is?"

Craig himself shuddered, from the mad violence of that voice.

"Well, Mr. Engineer, I'll tell you! The heart of the Earth is a ball of precious metals, separated by flotation. Gold, platinum, radium!"

"Your temporary prison, Mr. Engineer, is also the treasure room of the *Subterrane*. We have auxiliary disks, to cut sections of the Earth's heart to fill it. And your share can be your weight in gold—if you will promise to make any necessary repairs to the disruptors."

"I don't want any share—not from you," Craig told him.

But Maddrey's insanely blazing eyes had left Craig. They moved to the girl's slim, whip-marked loveliness. And Craig saw the terrible glare of an insane lust kindle in them. Maddrey chuckled, thickly.

"My darling, I told you not to come here." His voice had sunk to a thick gloating rasp. "You have disobeyed me. I must punish you for that." He chuckled again. "Or perhaps you enjoy the taste of the whip?"

Deliberately, the giant thrust the gun back into his belt. The sleek black serpent of the whip rippled through his

enormous thick fingers. It came hissing down through the narrow opening, and coiled around the girl's white throat.

It left a red welt, and she screamed.

"Don't you think that I am expert, Mr. Engineer?" boomed the great voice of Maddrey. "I used to skin a twelve-mule team, from the silver mines. I have cut off a Mexican wench's ear, at thirty feet."

A crimson rage tensed Craig. Reason told him he could do nothing. But fury drowned reason. Unarmed, swaying from that wedge of pain in his head, he swarmed up the flimsy ladder.

Maddrey was waiting for him, chuckling thickly. A great hobnailed boot crushed against his temple. It drove that wedge of agony deeper. The pain was intolerable, paralyzing.

Sick and dazed, Craig fell off the ladder. He dropped back to the metal floor. His head struck the wall. New agony half-blinded him. He lay breathless, half unconscious.

But still he could hear Maddrey's voice, like the roar of far-off surf:

"Darling, I see that your engineer is going to be no use to me. I think I'll shoot him." Craig heard no sound from the girl. But the bellow came again: "So you don't want him to die? Then strip yourself, and stand up to take your medicine."

Desperately, Craig fought to rise. He slipped back into a red sea of pain. His mind floated groggily on crimson waves, and he felt very ill. But he could see Ann, as if she were far-off.

HE saw her slipping the garments from the rich-curved slimness of her red-welted body. Once she hesitated, with a little sobbing protest. And the whip flicked down. With a pistol-sharp report, it cut a tiny silken strap, and left a tiny fleck of red upon her satin skin.

Then, naked, she stood up to wait for the whip. Craig heard the cruel hissing of it, and the vicious cracks. He saw red marks spring across the firm upturned breasts of the girl, her smooth white back, and the gleaming columns of her thighs.

She held her breath, and uttered no cry. Lifted up to Maddrey, her bloodless face was queerly composed. She was held in an ecstasy of pain.

Wincing from every report, Craig counted the strokes of the whip. It fell nine times, and stopped. The girl made a soft, sobbing moan, and dropped down upon the floor beside him.

Maddrey chuckled, and coiled the red whip in his hands. Craig heard the far booming of his voice:

"Remember, both of you—I am the master. The *Subterrane* is a little world, outside the law. And I am its king. Don't forget that. If you forget, the whip will remind you—"

Sick, helpless horror drove that agonizing wedge deeper into Craig's brain, and once more extinguished his awareness.

CHAPTER III

THE KINGDOM OF HELL

CRAIG was once more dimly conscious, when the *Subterrane* fell.

Ann Tancred was gone from the little steel-walled room. His throbbing head lay on a pillow, and a blanket covered his stiff body. The girl, he knew, must have brought him those.

The machinery was drumming again. That meant, he realized vaguely, that the metal mole was boring on down toward the Earth's core. And Ann was still at the mercy of Maddrey—insane with his ungoverned impulses, and his lust for unimaginable treasure.

The drumming abruptly stopped—

and the *Subterrane* fell.

Craig had a sick feeling in his stomach. He clutched wildly at the metal ladder. It seemed to him that the fall lasted an endless, terrible time. Somewhere above he heard Maddrey's bull-like voice, bellowing with fear and rage.

Then the mole struck, with a savage, crushing force. Craig's splitting head was driven against the metal floor again. But this time he clung doggedly to consciousness.

He heard the crash and shriek of tortured metal. He thought that the machine must have fallen to the floor of some cave, crushed itself with the impact. But it didn't lie still.

For a little time Craig suspected that the toss and pitch that sickened him was all in his own battered head. But the measured creak of metal plates and the roll of his body convinced him at last that the *Subterrane* was adrift upon underground waters.

Nerved with a desperate hope that Maddrey might have been injured by the fall, he dragged himself up the flimsy ladder. But the door above had been locked upon him. His empty hands battered upon it, in vain.

He shouted, and listened. But there was no sound save the creak of the plates and the slap of waves. At last, exhausted, Craig dropped back to the steel floor of the little treasure-room.

ATERRIBLE cold fear was growing in him. Was he the only one left alive? Was he doomed to slow death in a metal coffin, floating upon black buried waters that no eye had ever seen?

But, at least, Ann was freed from the whip.

So Craig told himself. But presently the iron deck above him rang once more to heavy foot-falls. Again he heard the bellowing tones of Maddrey. He heard a vicious crack—and

then the scream of Ann.

The old, numbing despair settled back into him.

Again he climbed the ladder, battered against the door. But the only response was the distant bellow of Maddrey's laughter, and another scream from Ann.

At last Craig heard the clang and grate of rocks beneath the machine's steel shell. He knew that they must have drifted to the edge of this unknown water. The *Subterrane* lay still.

Another time of intolerable suspense went by. Then Craig heard the click of a key in the lock above, and blue light blinded him. Maddrey's whip hissed, burned across his shoulders.

"Wake up, Mr. Engineer!" bellowed the giant. "I've got a job for you. You had better get about it—unless you want your hide peeled off!"

Craig blinked against the light, stared up into Maddrey's mad blue eyes.

"What's the job?" he demanded.

"The main transformer slipped off its mount, when we fell into this damned sea," Maddrey told him. "And the big disruptor disk burned out. It has got to be re-wired—or we'll all die in this damned hell."

Hope kindled in Craig again. Maddrey had never learned much about the invention he had stolen. Here was a chance to bargain for life. He caught his breath, and his shoulders drew straight.

"If I repair the disk," he said, "we're going to turn back to the surface. And you'll have to surrender your gun—and the whip."

Maddrey's blue eyes glittered cunningly.

"Perhaps I will," he said. "But first we'll inspect the damage. You must convince me that you know how to make the repairs. Come on out."

Craig climbed up the metal ladder. Reeling with exhaustion, suddenly

aware of torturing hunger, he walked ahead of Maddrey along a narrow metal deck. They peered down into the engine room, in the nose of the machine.

A chaos of broken machinery and tangled cables lay tumbled about the huge rectangular case of the fallen transformer. Craig surveyed the damage, and slowly shook his head.

Maddrey's voice was lowered, hoarse:

"Can you fix it?"

"Maybe," Craig told him. "But it will take weeks. Possibly months. If you want me to try it, hand over the whip and the gun."

Maddrey stepped back from him, and the mad eyes grew cunning again. He made an animal chuckle.

"I think you'll fix it, anyhow, Mr. Engineer," he said thickly. "I think you'd rather do that than see my whip skin the girl alive—one square inch at a time."

Cold blue eyes drilled into Craig.

"Hadn't you, Mr. Engineer?"

Weston Craig tried to meet that savage glare of ice and madness. Fear sent a prickling numbness over him. He tried desperately to remember things he had heard about how to deal with madmen. Nothing very hopeful came to mind.

"Speak up!" roared Maddrey.

Craig started, swallowed. He must pretend to yield. That was the only way. Perhaps he would have some opportunity to overpower Maddrey. He licked his lips, and nodded slowly.

"I'll try to make the repairs," he said.

"You *will* make them!" Maddrey boomed. "If you care about the girl—"

A sudden apprehension stiffened Craig. He peered into Maddrey's dark-bearded face, gasping:

"Where is she? If you've—"

Maddrey's answer was a bellowing call:

"Darling—we are ready to dine."

ANN TANCRED came out of a narrow door, and across the metal deck. She looked pale with fear, and her dark eyes were cast down. She carried a tray, and the dishes on it rattled to the trembling of her hands.

"Lively, now!" boomed Maddrey. "And don't spill it!"

The whip cracked, rifle-like. The pale girl cried out, and started. A glass of water danced out of the tray, splashed and splintered on the deck. Maddrey chuckled thickly.

"Darling—I warned you!"

His terrible eyes stared thirstily at the front of her tight silken blouse, swollen to the full contours of her breasts. The whip flicked out, slashed the fabric like a knife. Firm white flesh pushed through the slit, marked with a line of red.

The girl choked back her sob of pain. Tears fell into the dishes on the tray. And fury rose against Craig's fear. Fists knotted, he swung upon Maddrey.

The giant reached for his automatic.

"Strike me, and you die!" he boomed thickly. "But she shall be the one to pay—"

His roar was abruptly stopped.

Clan-n-n-n-n-g!

The iron hull above them rang to a crashing impact. It throbbed again, to a series of battering blows. Gripping whip and gun, Maddrey moved uneasily aft, toward the valve.

"It's something alive!" he croaked hoarsely. "We'll see—"

His great hairy hands spun a wheel. The small, massive oval door swung inward. There was an inrush of air. It was hot, heavy, musty—the fetid, overpowering breath of a rank and teeming jungle.

Peering over Maddrey's great shoulder, Craig looked out into the cave—and shuddered from a sense of evil nightmare.

The *Subterrane* lay upon a flat dark

beach. Beyond it was the jungle. A towering wall of livid, luminous, hostile forest. The shapes of the monstrous plants, and their pale glowing colors, were eerily strange.

Above the jungle rose the cave's rugged wall. It was pitted with the dark openings of cliff-dwellings. The glowing wings of huge, bat-like things flitted unpleasantly before them.

The dark and cragged roof was low above the *Subterrane*. But, in the distance, beyond a jutting salient of the cliffs, it lifted to an illimitable arch. Beneath it lay the vastness of the underground sea. The uneasy waters shone darkly, like blood made luminous.

"The mother of caves!" Maddrey's whisper seemed apprehensive. "This is the sea into which the underground waters drain. It seems that the things of the Earth's abyss, like those of the deep sea, make their own light—"

Horror choked off his voice.

The automatic crashed four times, deafening in the heavy air. Maddrey stepped fearfully back, and Craig saw the thing that he had shot.

A great, bat-like creature, like those soaring before the caves. As it tossed on the beach, in the agony of death, Craig could see that it was reptilian. Its body was scaled. The broad, leathery wings glowed as if lined with green flame. The teeth were hideous fangs, the lower limbs armed with fearful talons.

THE thing still gripped a heavy copper sledge, with which it must have been hammering on the hull of the *Subterrane*.

Craig swung protestingly on Maddrey.

"Why kill it?" he demanded. "Probably it meant no harm. May have been trying to signal, with the hammer. But now—God knows what will happen!"

Maddrey snapped a full clip into the

automatic. He gulped—a little fearfully, Craig thought. But then all the roaring violence of his voice came back:

"I'm the master, here! You say we may be here for months. Well, I'll show these winged devils who is their ruler."

"You'll have your chance, looks as if," Craig commented. "Right now."

With a trembling arm, he pointed. A horde of the bright-winged troglodytes were gliding down from the cliffs beyond the jungle. Snarling, hissing, grunting, cackling, they swarmed about the machine.

Maddrey fired half a dozen shots into the fantastic bedlam that they made. A copper spear came clattering through the opening. Hastily he spun the wheel, to close the valve again.

Dry-voiced, Craig demanded:

"What now, Mr. Conqueror?"

"Frightened?" Maddrey boomed scornfully. "The beasts have nothing better than copper. The *Subterrane* is an oyster they can't open—not in a thousand years."

Craig tried to wet his throat.

"I am afraid," he whispered. "Maybe they can't open the oyster—but they're going to cook us in the shell! Didn't you see them—carrying torches, and broken branches?

"We've no power to move the *Subterrane*. And fire, in the oxygen of this super-dense atmosphere, will be about ten times more effective than any blaze you've ever known.

"Listen!"

Faintly, through the thick steel hull, they heard the eager crackling roar of flames.

CHAPTER IV

THE POISONED WHIP

THE plates of the *Subterrane* grew hot. Paint began to bubble and crack and smoke. The air became searing, stifling. The fire outside

made a steadily mounting roar.

Maddrey paced up and down the hot metal deck, cursing in a hoarse and frightened voice. Ann Tancred had quietly fainted, from terror and exhaustion and heat. Her white body lay sprawled on the floor, beside the tray she had dropped. Maddrey, passing, cut at her viciously with the whip. She made a sleepy little moan, but did not move.

"Stop it!" choked Craig. "You devil!"

The mad blue eyes of Maddrey swung to him.

"Well, Mr. Engineer," his thick voice mocked, "what else do you suggest? I may die uncomfortably. But at least I intend to have the pleasure of witnessing agony greater than my own."

The whip flicked out again, to make a thin red mark on the exposed curve of Ann's white thigh. Her leg drew up a little, and she moaned again. Maddrey looked back at Craig.

"Unless, Mr. Engineer," his great voice said, "you can repair the disruptor disk and form a new neutronic film to protect us from the heat."

Craig's fists were knotted with impotent wrath. His lean body quivered. That old wedge of pain was driving into his head again, and he swayed from a weakness that he could not overcome.

"I can't fix the main disk." His voice came faint and husky. "But I think I can do something else—if you'll leave Ann alone."

The mad eyes of Maddrey gleamed cunningly.

"What can you do?"

"The auxiliary disks—the ones intended to cut samples from the rocks—don't seem to be injured," Craig told him. "And a rather simple change in the wiring will project the disruption field as a tubular vortex."

He was remembering the laboratory accident, four years ago, and the green

ray that had cut through the wall. Perhaps, he thought wearily, it would have been better if he hadn't come along to save Ann.

"Then get at it!" Maddrey's ruthless hand seized his shoulder. "Before we're all cooked alive!"

For an instant Craig resisted. He would only be saving Ann to face further tortures. Then a spark of hope came to his pain-dulled brain. Perhaps he could turn the new weapon upon Maddrey, first.

But the cold eyes of Maddrey watched him, with a cunning alertness, as he dismounted the instrument from its armored port, and labored to alter the wiring behind the shining, foot-wide terminal disk.

The roar of flames without grew louder as he worked. The heat inside the hull passed the limit of endurance. Craig's clothing was drenched with sweat, then dried again. Hot metal blistered his fingers, and the air burned his lungs. A sick weakness dragged him toward oblivion.

Ann moaned again, on the hot deck. Once she struggled, as if suffocating. Unconscious fingers ripped away her blouse. Her whip-scarred breasts stood out naked, jeweled with tiny drops of sweat, quivering to her gasping breath.

Craig swayed over his task. Covertly he watched Maddrey. He hoped that the giant would collapse, give him one second's opportunity. But Maddrey seemed unaware of the heat. His blue cunning eyes never wavered.

That crimson wedge was driving deeper, dulling Craig's brain. His blistered fingers grew lifeless and numb. Maddrey's great hairy hands helped him make the last connection.

And Maddrey seized the disk, gasping:

"Thank you, Mr. Engineer!"

Craig pitched limply down to the blistering deck, and Maddrey went out

to fight the troglodytes. Dimly, Craig saw him open the valve. Darkly, as in a glass, he saw the blinding green finger that probed from the disk—and cut a flapping beast-creature in twain.

Then Craig's awareness mercifully faded.

It was a long time before Craig was fully conscious again. Mere snatches of sanity broke his delirium. He knew that fever parched him, spreading from the throbbing agony of his wound.

ANN was allowed to tend him for a time. Memories of her cool tender hands, and the terror-haunted eyes in her pale sweet face, mingled with his mad dreams. But nothing in all his delirium was more terrible than the sound of Maddrey's whip, and the sobbing of the girl.

Presently her place was taken by another, monstrous nurse.

A troglodyte!

Craig knew, at last, that he had been carried out the *Subterrane*, to a flimsy little frond-thatched hut above the beach. The hideous, leather-winged reptile-thing waited on him there, bringing water and copper bowls of unfamiliar, ill-cooked food.

The very odor of the thing was almost deadly. It was peculiarly acrid, revolting. A concentrated essence, Craig thought, from the snake-house in the zoo. The hut was saturated with it, and the hissing monster haunted his delirium.

In spite of the odor, however, Craig felt at last that the wound was healing. The wedge of pain was gone. Sanity returned, and he began to realize what had happened.

Maddrey had conquered the troglodytes. Their copper weapons had failed, against the terrible green ray from the disruptor disk. Maddrey was now the ruthless tyrant of a strange kingdom.

The reptiles, Craig thought, were about as intelligent as primitive man. They had a grunting language that Maddrey had learned. They hardened copper, to make simple weapons and tools. Dwelling in rock caves, they hatched their young from eggs, and flew across the scarlet sea to hunt for food.

They were just advanced enough to feel a superstitious awe for the beings who had come plunging down through the roof of their world. Maddrey had established himself, Craig discovered, as a sort of god.

He exacted tribute from the troglodytes — ornaments of hammered gold, and red pearls that came from the shining sea. He compelled them to build him a rude, leaf-thatched palace, in a walled compound at the edge of the jungle.

So Maddrey reigned, with ray and whip, over his strange kingdom—waiting for Craig to repair the wrecked *Subterrane*.

Many times Craig had wakened, from his uneasy feverish sleep, to find the dark-bearded giant towering over him, the black whip trailing from his immense cruel hands. And Maddrey had stalked, beside the screaming troglodyte, through his delirium.

"Well, Mr. Engineer!"

It seemed to Craig that he had heard that same mocking boast a thousand times—usually accompanied with an expert, agonizing flick of Maddrey's whip.

"Perhaps you hope to get rid of me?" the great voice would boom. "Well, then—repair the *Subterrane*! And I'll go on, with a crew of the trogs. Maybe I'll take the girl—if she can stand the whip so long. But I'll have to leave you behind, Mr. Engineer. We'll see if you can rule the trogs!"

Maddrey was crazy. No doubt of that. And getting crazier, as mad impulse met no restraint. But insanity

didn't keep him from being very cunning, and very dangerous.

Craig promised that he would set about repairing the *Subterrane*, as soon as he was able. He made the promise for Ann's sake—after a time when the steaming, fetid jungle wind brought her screams to him, from Maddrey's compound.

In one way only, Craig learned, had Maddrey's mad will been thwarted.

Among the tribal treasures of the troglodytes were great crimson pearls. Maddrey avidly appropriated all that he could discover. And, learning that pearl-bearing mollusks lived in the luminescent sea, he made the creatures build a wooden canoe.

He tried to force them to dredge for the precious shell. But the troglodytes displayed an invincible fear of the scarlet sea. Their few pearls had come from shells washed ashore. Maddrey's whip, and even the deadly ray, failed to make them enter the boat.

At last a time came when Craig was able to stumble out of his hospital hut. He walked swaying up the trail toward Maddrey's high-walled compound, with his reptilian nurse-maid flapping and hissing behind him. He hoped to see Ann.

BUT a sentry stopped him, at the gate. The thing looked a little like an enormous, scale-covered bird. As tall as Craig, it stood upon the spread talons of one foot, and clutched a long, copper-bladed spear in the other. Its huge eyes, yellow-red and phosphorescent, blinked at him with an alternate malice.

And it hissed an angry warning.

The massive wooden gate swung open. Maddrey appeared. He was trailing a new whip, that was purple and luminous.

"Maddrey—" Craig gasped hoarsely, "I've got to see Ann."

The mad, icy eyes of Maddrey mocked him.

"You're mistaken, Mr. Engineer," the great voice boomed. "You won't see her till the *Subterrane* is repaired." Maddrey chuckled hoarsely. "But, if you like, you may *hear* her!"

He drew the shining purple lash through black-gloved fingers.

"I've a new whip, you see," he said thickly. "The trogs are afraid of the medusae that float on the crimson sea. I have found the reason why. The tentacles are covered with thousands of tiny, poisoned hooks. I have braided the new whip from them. The pain—

"But taste it for yourself, Mr. Engineer!"

Lightning-swift, the thin purple lash darted out. Craig flung up his arm, to keep it from his face. The touch was light. It hardly marked the skin. But sheer agony splintered through him. It was blinding, paralyzing. He was drowned in purple pain. It was a tortured eternity before he could move or see or speak.

"Do you like the taste, Mr. Engineer?" Maddrey was booming at him, thickly. "That is what the girl must drink—until you have the *Subterrane* repaired."

He stepped back within. The compound gate creaked shut. The sentry blinked and snarled, and Craig turned trembling back toward the beach. He shuddered, to the knife-like scream that followed him.

CHAPTER V

MADMAN'S DREAM

CRAIG began the difficult repair, and time went by. Maddrey had carried away the other auxiliary disk, so that it could not be rewired into a weapon. And he removed the power

tubes, that were essential to the operation of the main disk. Sometimes he came, with his monstrous retinue, to mock at Craig's helpless toil.

Craig had no measure of the time that passed. Maddrey had taken his watch, and the cave knew neither day nor night. He ate when hunger impelled, the strange foods the monsters brought him. He slept when he had to. And toiled as long as he was able—for the hot, heavy, humid air often brought him the piteous screaming of Ann.

But the long wound on his head had completely healed. He felt that the cave's stern life had toughened him a little. He found hope sometimes to plan against Maddrey's harsh dominion—but the talons of his old fear had never released him.

Months, he thought, had gone. The great transformer had been laboriously hoisted, bolted back into place again. His task was almost done, on the day that Ann came.

She came running down the jungle trail, from Maddrey's palisade. Craig heard her eager call, aboard the *Subterrane*, and ran anxiously to meet her. His eyes devoured her tall, sweet-curving loveliness.

All Maddrey's torture, he saw, had not broken her. Time had smoothed many of the marks of the whip from her white body. She had made new clothing for herself, of soft skins.

But the brown leather jacket was ripped across the shoulder, and Craig could see that one of her breasts was beaded with scarlet drops.

"Oh, Weston!" she sobbed. "Weston—we've got to do—*something*!"

Held close in his arms, she shuddered with terror. The bleeding cushion of her breast was hot against Craig's torn shirt. The red drops wet his skin.

"My darling!" He kissed her. "We must—"

"He's insane!" She quivered in his arms. "He's planning terrible things. He's planning to take back an army of the trogs—and attack the world with your disruptor ray. He says he can change the main disk, like the one you rewired."

Holding the girl's hot, pliant body close, Craig tried to repress his own shudder. But he knew what the main disk would be, as a weapon. Frightful instrumentality! Its beam of green annihilation would probe for forty miles. Slice through any fortress! Sink any battleship!

The *Subterrane* would be almost invincible. It could always retreat to safety underground. It could strike unawares, at any point. In the midst of an army, the center of an unwarmed city.

"Oh, Weston!" The girl's dark eyes were bright with tears. "I'm so afraid! Can't you run the machine, so that we can get away? Or turn it on Maddrey—somehow?"

Craig's fists were clenched. Quivering with desperation, he looked at the huge helpless bulk of the *Subterrane*, at the margin of the dark-shining sea. He peered toward Maddrey's palisade, at the eldritch jungle's edge.

Hopeless, baffled, he shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Ann," he muttered. "Maddrey carried away the auxiliary disk. And he got the power tubes too—so I couldn't start the machine, even if I finished the repairs sooner than he expects. Once I tried to slip into the compound. But his monsters are always on guard—"

He bit his lip.

"But, West!" sobbed the girl. "We've got to do something. We must try to get away!" She shuddered and turned pale. "If he takes me again—" she whispered faintly. "That poisoned whip—don't let him take me!"

Craig caught his breath.

"My darling," he promised, "I'll do my best!" His shoulders lifted resolutely. "Anyhow," he said, "Maddrey won't attack the Earth. In five minutes I can tear loose the wiring from the disk. I know he can't repair it."

His arm drew hard around her trembling body.

"Then we'll try to get away from him," he breathed. "But I don't know how—"

"Hurry!" sobbed the girl.

FRANTICALLY, Craig labored to undo the work of weeks. He tore wires from their terminals, smashed again the delicate instruments he had rebuilt. Maddrey must not carry out his scheme of mad conquest. Now, he would not.

Ann's frightened voice brought Craig back out of the *Subterrane*. Nerveless, pale with terror, the girl stood by the red water's edge, paralyzed. Her glazed eyes were staring, toward Maddrey's palisade.

"Oh, West!" she breathed faintly. "It's too late!"

For Maddrey came stalking down the trail, from his compound in the phosphorescent jungle. King of the cavern world! He wore a rude gold crown, set with the red malevolent eye of a scarlet pearl.

The mighty barrel of his body was covered with the black-and-yellow fur of some animal the troglodytes had caught in the mysterious land beyond the scarlet sea. His belt was the broad skin of a crimson serpent.

His automatic was thrust in that belt, and a long copper knife. The disruptor disk was slung from his shoulders. Swinging from his black-gloved hand were the purple-shining coils of the poison whip.

Screaming behind him, hopping awkwardly on their taloned feet, spreading green-glowing wings to balance them-

selves, came four of the troglodytes. The heavy wind carried ahead their sharp, sickening stench.

"Well, darling!"

Cold and bright and terrible behind the tangle of black beard, the eyes of Maddrey sought the terror-stricken girl.

"I told you not to leave my palace," his great voice said thickly. "I don't need to tell you, dear, what your punishment will be."

Like a live thing, the purple whip uncoiled itself across the hard black sand. Frozen with terror, the girl uttered a mute, frantic little cry of protest.

Trembling, Craig stepped forward.

"Maddrey—" His voice came low and husky, past the fear that choked him. "You'll have to give up your plans of conquest. Because I have just dismantled the main disk. I've undone all the repairs.

"The *Subterrane* won't move again!"

Behind the black beard, Maddrey went livid with rage.

"You—" His bellow choked. "You'll complete the repairs."

Craig gulped.

"I won't do it, Maddrey." His voice was dry with fear. "You can do anything you like. Whip me. Kill me. But I'm through taking orders from you. That's all. Through!"

The cold mad eyes of Maddrey glittered again, craftily.

"Big talk, Mr. Engineer!" Drawing the thin shining length of the whip through black-gloved fingers, he laughed thickly, maliciously. "But I'm not at your mercy. I'm still the king!"

The ice-blue eyes went from Craig to the girl. She shuddered before Maddrey's eyes, and made a dry sob of fear. The whip cracked explosively. Another red drop oozed out of her white, quivering flesh. And she made a dull, hopeless little whimper of agony.

Maddrey coiled the whip, turned

back to Craig.

"I'm a scientist, Mr. Engineer," he boasted. "I can compare the two auxiliary disks, and discover what you did—it was merely a change in the wiring. I can learn how to rewire the main disk—into a scourge that will conquer the planet!"

He gestured with the whip at the grotesque monsters standing behind him, blinking huge luminescent eyes.

"The trogs are natural artizans," he boomed. "I'm teaching them modern science. They'll build me a fleet of *Subterrane*s. So I don't need you, Mr. Engineer."

He licked his thick lips.

"I'll give you a choice." Maddrey chuckled, and leered at the fear-frozen girl again. "You can complete the repairs, if you like. Or you and the girl can take the canoe the trogs made, and go dive for pearls!"

Craig awayed to a stunning impact of horror.

"Kill us, if you like." His voice was hoarse and flat. "But we won't go out on the sea. You know why. You've seen the things in that red water. Even the trogs are afraid—"

"Take your choice," Maddrey repeated thickly. "Repair the disk. Or dive!"

Craig's fists were clenched.

"I told you, Madrey," He choked. "I'm through!"

But Ann Tancred's quivering fingers clutched his arm.

"We'll go," she whispered faintly. "Tell him we'll go out for pearls."

CHAPTER IV

SCARLET PEARLS

AT the compound's gate, Craig lifted the canoe to his shoulders. It was a frail shell of hardwood. The troglodytes that made it had dis-

played an amazing skill. Could they really build more *Subterranea*, as Maddrey's mad brain planned?

One of them was watching at the gate. It shifted its balance from one taloned foot to the other, blinked its enormous evilly shining eyes, and hissed at him unpleasantly.

Could Maddrey's flapping reptilian hordes overcome mankind? It was not likely, Craig knew. Maddrey's twisted mind would blunder, somewhere. But there was a nightmare possibility, that haunted him. Wings of horror, over the world!

Craig carried the canoe down to the beach. Lapping against the black sand, the red water seemed thick and heavy as oil. Its luminescence, he knew, was due to billions of microscopic organisms, perhaps akin to *Noctiluca Scintillans*. But still it seemed to him a sea of blood. He trembled with dread of the monstrous life that dwelt beneath it.

Ann came staggering behind him, laden with paddle and basket and anchor rope. Maddrey stalked behind her. She stumbled once, and the purple whip cracked, and she screamed.

Craig set the canoe down, trembling. "So you don't like her to be whipped?" Maddrey laughed at his futile anger. "Well, Mr. Engineer, if you want her to know what whipping means—just come back without a pearl!"

Craig snatched the paddle from the girl, started back toward Maddrey. Maddrey reached for his automatic. The troglodytes screamed ominously behind him. Ann caught Craig's arm.

"Come on," she urged. "He'd kill you!"

And Craig turned back. They piled the equipment into the canoe. Ann sat in the bow. He pushed it out on the oily red surface, stepped aboard, dipped the paddle.

"Remember!" Maddrey boomed

after them. "A pearl—or the whip!"

With long deep strokes, Craig drove them out across the dully shining water. The dark, craggy roof sank toward the crimson surface behind them. The jungle became a narrow blur of blue, above the thin black line of the beach.

Suddenly Ann's bare white arm gestured ahead.

"Oh, West!" she cried, huskily. "Let's never go back!"

Craig sat as if frozen, with the paddle lifted. His gray eyes stared for a long time into the vaulted gloom, above the mysterious scarlet infinity of the sea. His lean face lit slowly, to an eager hope.

"There's land!" he whispered at last. "Beyond—somewhere. It can't be so very far. Because the trogs fly across, to hunt."

His eager eyes came back to the girl.

"There might—" His voice shook. "There might even be a way—outside!"

Ann was breathless. "Outside?"

"The living things here," he said slowly, "are akin to those in the world above. They must have come down, through some opening—if we could only find it!"

"But—West!" she protested, doubtfully. "Everything here is so different—so terribly strange!"

"I know," he said. "Evolution has changed everything here, to live in darkness and humidity and high air-pressure. The adaptation must have taken ages. And the passage may have been closed a million years ago."

He stared again, into the dark arch of mystery ahead.

"Most caverns are formed by the carbonic acid gas in water, dissolving limestone rock. Underground rivers must flow down into this sea. If we could follow them up, we might find some passage to the surface—"

HE HEARD Ann's muted cry, and saw the terror glaze her eyes.

"See, West!" she gasped. "He won't let us go!"

Looking back, Craig found the dark line of the beach, with the rust-red-dened cylinder of the *Subterrane* lying athwart it. Against the luminous jungle, he could see Maddrey's palisade. Green wings were spread above it.

A troglodyte was flapping after them.

Trembling, Craig dipped the paddle again.

"No," he whispered, "Maddrey will never let us go. Because he still wants me to repair the *Subterrane*. He thinks fear will drive me to do it. But I won't!"

He wet his lips, gulped.

"Ann—I mustn't!"

The soaring reptile overtook them. It wheeled low above the canoe. Each green-shining leathery wing was weirdly splotched with a lurid yellow marking, like a yellow eye. They seemed to blink, as the great wings beat. The fanged beak opened, as the creature dived. It hissed viciously.

Ann shuddered.

"No, West," she whispered, "you mustn't repair the *Subterrane*—and let Maddrey lead these things against the world!"

Craig paddled on, beneath the flapping hissing monster, until *Subterrane* and palisade were tiny with distance. He sounded with cord and stone to find a shoal, and at last dropped the weighted basket over the side.

Fighting a silent battle with his fear of the red depths, he prepared to dive. Stripped off the worn remnant of his shirt. Thrust a copper knife into his belt.

Suddenly Ann flung her arms around him clung to him.

"Don't, West!" she sobbed. "You may be—killed! Let's go on—in spite

of the monster!"

Craig shook his unkempt head.

"It would follow," he whispered. "More would come. We could never get away. We must wait, for a better chance."

He kissed her cold lips, and dived.

The water was like a thick, shining mist of blood. It stung his opened eyes. He searched along the rocky bottom, amid grotesque sharp-spined phosphorescent creatures.

At last he found a giant shell. A huge, age-old oval, it was black itself, but encrusted with tiny luminescent things. He detached it with a quick slash of the copper knife, lifted it into the basket.

Already his lungs were aching. But he found another great shell. Another. And a fourth. Rotten with time, they crumbled under his fingers. In one he thought he felt the smooth round of a pearl.

Four shells filled the basket, and his lungs were throbbing, bursting. He grasped the rope, heaved himself to the surface. The watching troglodyte dived low again, and screamed.

Craig clung panting to the gunwale, getting back his breath. Beneath the oily crimson surface, something touched his feet. He kicked out, and a needle of agony drove into his knee.

Hastily he tumbled into the boat, and hauled up the basket of shell. Ann took the great black mollusks, as he opened them, to probe the decaying flesh for pearls. His eyes lifted anxiously to her white, frightened face.

"None."

She shook her head, and her dark eyes rested sadly upon Craig. Her fingers tossed the last rotting shellfish back into the crimson sea.

"None," she repeated.

Craig's heart constricted with fear.

"I thought—thought I felt one!" he protested anxiously. "Now I must dive

again."

"Wait, Weston!"

HER voice was urgent, tense with dread. Her frightened fingers closed hard on his arm. She pointed at the red water beside the canoe. Craig saw a swirl of crimson foam.

Hideous, hairy yellow limbs were fighting for the mollusks they had thrown back!"

"Let's go on!" begged the girl. "On across the sea—"

But Craig jerked his head at the wheeling troglodyte.

"We could never get away."

He kissed Ann's cold tense lips, and dived again.

Three shells were in the basket, when something touched his shoulder with scarlet flame. He twisted to face his attacker. It was a water spider, larger than himself!

In the stinging scarlet water, its body was a glowing yellow moon. Its huge eyes shone purple. Its limbs were hairy, taloned, frightful.

Craig slashed at it desperately. But the dull copper blade slithered harmlessly from the fearful limb that gripped him. He caught the shank in his hands, wrenched with a frantic strength.

The talon came free from his shoulder. Agony shocked him, and a new blinding red was in his eyes. He caught the rope, heaved desperately. With a maddening slowness, he came upward.

He felt the rush of the thing beneath his feet, and it came to the surface almost as quickly as he. Great hairy yellow arms broke the water, groping for him. The sinister purple eyes shone just beneath the surface.

Frantically, Craig scrambled aboard. Panting with pain and terror and exhaustion, with red water streaming down his arms, he hauled desperately

at the basket rope.

But a new furious commotion broke the water to scarlet foam. A terrific jerk tore the rope from his fingers. He fell in the bottom of the canoe.

"Weston!" Ann was sobbing. "Oh, Weston—you're hurt!"

Then she shrieked. Hideous yellow arms came over the gunwale. A frightful black talon caught her jacket, tore it half off her.

Craig dragged himself back to his knees, seized the paddle. A swift blow broke that fearful limb. He dipped the paddle, pulled the canoe desperately away. The troglodyte dived on shimmering green wings, hissing insidiously.

"Your shoulder!" Ann was sobbing. "West—your shoulder!"

Craig flung away the red drops that ran down his arm.

"Doesn't matter," he gasped. "No pearl. Can't dive again. Not without basket and rope." His red shoulders straightened. "So we've got to go on—in spite of the trog!"

A new eager light shone in his eyes. "Anyhow, we'll try."

Ignoring the blood seeping down from his lacerated shoulder, Craig drove the canoe forward again across the shining scarlet sea, toward the black illimitable mysterious arch ahead.

"I'm glad, Weston!" breathed the girl. "Glad—even if we die!"

Above them, the green-winged troglodyte hissed and screamed its menace.

CHAPTER VII

THE RIVER OF TERROR

FEAR rode the canoe. Craig knew in his heart that it was one grim pursuer that he and the girl could never escape. But he dipped the paddle swiftly, fighting weariness and pain.

"West!" screamed Ann, from the

bow. "Behind you!"

Craig felt the dip and swing of the canoe. Twisting, he saw that the troglodyte had dropped upon the stern. Great black talons gripped the gunwales. Shimmering green wings were still half spread, for balance. The toothed beak was hissing.

Craig half rose in the boat, and brought the paddle over his head with a swinging blow. A green wing lifted, caught it harmlessly. The beak seized the deflected paddle, tore it from his fingers, flung it into the darkly shining water.

Disarmed, Craig trembled.

The huge yellow-red eyes blinked alternately. The creature hitched itself forward. The fanged beak struck and screamed and struck again.

Craig shrank back, chilled with sweat of fear.

"Here!" Ann whispered.

He felt the hilt of the long copper knife in his hand. Surging to his feet on the bottom of the canoe, he lunged. The scaly body was hard beneath the dull blade. The leathery wings folded about him, suffocating with their sickening reek. Black talons raked at him murderously.

The monster swayed with him. They toppled out of the canoe. Craig gasped for breath as they sank in scarlet water. He stabbed, stabbed again and again. Still the wings wrapped him, still fangs and talons slashed.

Abruptly, then, something was ripping at the wings. In the painful, blinding scarlet dimness of the water, he glimpsed hideous yellow limbs. He saw an evil yellow moon, and evil orbs of purple.

The spider had followed.

The troglodyte writhed in agony. The great wings unfolded. Craig drew up his feet, kicked against the scaled body. A hairy yellow limb reached for him. He slashed at it with the copper

blade, fought his way upward.

Ann had retrieved the paddle. She drove the canoe toward him. He clambered shakily aboard, and she paddled away from the increasing confusion in the foaming red water. Craig saw the black, mutilated body of the troglodyte flung clear of the surface, dragged back again by fighting yellow limbs—scores of them.

As soon as he could, Craig relieved Ann. With splinters from the canoe's hard wood, she pinned her torn jacket together again, to cover the curves of her blood-stained breasts.

And they went on across the scarlet sea.

The black roof lifted above them, until it was lost in murky gloom. Now and again they steered away from cragged black walls that rose abruptly from the darkly shining water. However long the cavern might be, Craig supposed, it was never very wide.

Sitting in the bow, Ann kept an apprehensive watch behind. But no green-winged troglodyte appeared to follow them. Until at last a confused tremendous roaring came to them across the luminous waters, and then a vague new light was visible against the black and lofty vault ahead.

Presently a new wall of jungle was visible, a barrier higher and more ominous than that upon the shore they had left. Far along it, miles in the distance, a bright pillar of scarlet stood up above the red sea.

The roaring came from that pillar, endlessly.

They reached the shore. Overleaning the dark water, weird plants thrust themselves fifty feet upward. The jungle was a flat-topped wall of menace. Blood-red tentacles writhed from immense, bell-shaped violet blooms. Tremendous fungi were choked in masses of twisting creepers.

"We could never cut a way through

that!" Craig muttered apprehensively. "Even if there's nothing to attack—and probably there is!"

CLOUDS of fire drifted above the jungle. Eerie colors shimmered through it—yellow and purple and flaming green. A luminous mist settled toward them. And Ann gasped with pain.

Suddenly they were both slapping furiously at faces and bare arms and the numerous rents in their clothing. For the cloud consisted of minute, luminous insects, whose stings were liquid agony.

Craig drove the canoe back until the torturing swarms diminished. Then they paddled on toward that roaring, enigmatic pillar of red. The low wall of weirdly shining jungle presently became higher. The marshes were broken by lofty cliffs, that shone with blue lichens. Beyond were mysterious, darkly glowing hills.

The roaring had become a crashing, incessant thunder. At last, rounding a dark headland, they saw the crimson fall. Over a sheer precipice, hundreds of feet high, came a long wall of water. A sheet of lambent scarlet, it tumbled into a maelstrom of shining foam.

Craig caught his breath to shout above the din:

"Above the fall—must be a river. We can go up it—toward the Outside! If we can get around the fall!"

He paddled in again, toward the foot of a mossy cliff. They dragged the canoe up upon a narrow scrap of beach, and then climbed inland. The wonder and the terror of this new world awed them to silence.

Far away, beyond a shining purple cloud, the cragged wall of the cave was visible. Ranges of hills rolled down from it, to their feet. Fantastic world! Everything was luminous.

The soil was covered with a softly

glowing, yellow-green moss. And stranger plants scattered it. Here and there thick brown stalks towered out of low dense clumps of greenish fronds. Each stalk bore, a hundred feet above, a swollen sphere of elfin blue.

"Blue moons," Craig whispered. "Growing on stalks!"

He remembered a lecture on animal luminescence. The speaker had described two wonder-chemicals. The protein, *luciferine*. And the enzyme, *luciferase*. The first is oxidized, he recalled, in the presence of the second. The chemical products are *oxy-luciferase* and water. And light is emitted by the most efficient process known to science.

Strange illustration of scientific fact!

Creeping apprehensively, side by side, Craig and Ann came to the summit of the hill. Beyond the forest of moon, winding away like an unimaginable crimson snake, they saw the river.

The river of terror!

Craig shuddered to a cold shock of fear, and drew Ann's trembling body close to his side. The bend of the river spread vast, almost, as a second scarlet sea. Its flatness was alive with dull red light, scattered with floating masses of decaying fungi and patches of greenish scum.

Above it drifted weird-hued clouds of many-colored fire. The farther shore was faintly visible, a gleaming line of metallic blue and frigid violet, radiant with deadly plants.

Far-off, the river came out of another dark arch of mystery. Craig stared for a long time into it, as if trying to see every peril and heartbreak and disaster that might await them there.

Abruptly he shook himself, as if breaking from an unpleasant trance, and caught his breath.

"We may get through alive," he whispered. "We *must*! But there's such a lot to do. We'll have to bring

the canoe up through the jungle, and over the hill—we'd never make a mile, without it. But first we must have a fire—a smudge to keep away those insects. And food—”

So began another epic of frightful risk and desperate effort and unmeasured agony. They searched for dry wood, to make a fire by friction. Craig pitted the copper knife against poison-dripping yellow fangs, and killed a ten-foot greenish lizard. They dried and smoked its flesh for food, dressed its skin for clothing.

THE dead, heavy air, reeking with the rot of the swamps, was hot and fetid as some unclean monster's breath. Despite the smudge, the stinging insects made rest impossible. Gigantic black spiders swung down from their webs in the forest of moods, to silent and deadly attack.

Exhaustion became a kind of anodyne for fear. A time came even when the continuity of Craig's mind was broken. He toiled in a dull gray haze. He knew only that peril pressed on behind, and awaited them ahead.

Behind, the horror of the troglodytes, and the madness of Maddrey's venomous whip.

Ahead, unguessed danger, guarding the undiscovered passage—if any passage did exist—to the sanity and the sunlight of the world above.

Sometimes, when he had rested, his mind was very vivid. He saw Ann's slender dark-eyed loveliness, without her rags and her half-healed scars and the fear that was like a shadow over her. It was as if he had never seen her before.

“I love you, Ann,” he told her. “And I know we'll find a way!”

Such lucid moments, however, were rare.

Craig lived in a haze of exhaustion. For he had little rest. He hacked with

the dull copper knife at the teeming river jungle. He dragged the canoe over hot mud that quaked with hideous unseen life beneath.

And the world outside seemed remote beyond imagination.

A brief elation mounted in him, when at last they pushed the canoe out upon the river. Ann sat in the bow, tending the smudge that held back the swarming midges that looked and felt like clouds of fire.

The shining, hostile jungle wall fell away behind. And the eldritch forest of moons, beneath which they had fought so long. Silence seemed strange, after the endless thunder of the fall. Darkness pressed upon the red waters ahead, hiding both menace and hope.

“We're on the river!”

Craig shouted with elation, as he paddled.

“And water runs downhill. If we go up—and keep on going up—we've got to come to the top of the ground!”

His answer was a raucous, hissing scream.

Ann looked up, and her face went suddenly white. Craig stopped paddling. Trembling, he stared. Two troglodytes flapped low above them. Green flame lined the blackness of their wings, and orange spots winked like monstrous evil eyes.

“Maddrey's beasts!” whispered Ann. “And—see!” Terror choked her. “One of them is going back to tell him where we are!”

Neither of the creatures attacked. But one of them, indeed, with a last vicious hiss, flew back toward the crimson sea. The other still followed—implacable, green-winged nemesis!



CHAPTER VIII

THE BLOOM OF DOOM

CRAIG toiled at the paddle. Time lost its meaning. There were no days, no nights. The darkly shining current; the heavy, enervating heat; the tiny, leaking canoe; the slick-handled paddle; their ragged tortured bodies; the tormenting midges; the monster screaming and wheeling above—such things were the only realities.

They lived with but a thin shell of wood between themselves and death. The choking smudge was never out of their nostrils. The scant food that chance brought them they cooked in the smudge-fire. They slept but seldom, half-sitting, cramped. They never left the canoe and the river.

Another troglodyte came at last to relieve the first, and a third to take the place of that, and another, until Craig no longer counted the changes.

"Why do they do it, West?" Ann once whispered fearfully. "Why do they just haunt us? They're getting my nerves." She shuddered. "Almost, I'd rather they attacked!"

Craig's tired eyes lifted to the flapping monster.

"I can think of just one reason," he said slowly. "Maddrey must be following, himself!" Despite himself, the tremor of fear came into his dried, husky voice. "He must send them ahead, to watch us and guide him."

Craig looked down at the girl. His gray eyes met her frightened dark ones. Together, they said:

"He won't take us!"

Time there was none. But the scarlet river changed. It narrowed. The opposing current was swifter. The weird life along the banks became different, although no less hostile.

Ann sometimes paddled, while Craig slept. But she could make little gain

against the strengthening current, and more often they anchored in shallow water, near the shore. There she had only to watch, and tend the smudge.

It was on such a time that Craig came awake, cold and tensed from some intuition of horror. He saw that Ann was asleep, over the smudge. Sickened with an icy, paralyzing dread, he saw—

The bloom!

The plant was drifting toward the canoe, as if some slow eddy moved it through the stagnant shallows. Its broad leaves, yards across, lay flat upon the water. Thick green pads, filled with air-cells, they formed a raft that supported the enormous, luminous bloom.

Amazing, fascinating, was the beauty of that flower.

Yet the first sleep-drugged glimpse of it filled Craig with monstrous dread. Shimmering with a blue that was cold as arctic twilight, the petals formed a wondrous ten-foot bowl of sapphire radiance.

A bowl of hellish fire!

Twin black filaments reached like living whips above the bowl's rim. At their tips hung brilliant little spheres of frigid violet. The whips crawled and wavered. The little globes lifted and fell.

They lifted and fell.

Lifted—fell—

Craig watched them. He followed their slow, monotonous motion. They seemed presently to be returning his gaze. He began to wonder dimly if they were really eyes.

A vague alarm stirred him faintly.

HE WAS getting sleepy again. It must have been the swaying of the spheres that had made Ann sleep at her post. He tried to turn, to look at her. He was shocked with a cold sudden impact of apprehension, for Ann.

But he couldn't move.

His eyes could not leave the little violet orbs that rose and fell, waxed and waned, slowly rose and fell.

Then he perceived the perfume. It was sweet, almost insipid. Vaguely, he saw that it had been sprayed toward him. It came in a pinkish, shining cloud, from some unseen source within the giant, bright calyx. He drifted away into the roseate mist of it—

Into shining pinkish cloud-caverns of sleep.

He sighed and closed his eyes. The flower had commanded him to sleep. He was exhausted, from eternal effort with the paddle. It was Ann's duty to keep watch. It was right for him to sleep—

But he heard Ann's sleepy little whimpering sob. A sudden sharp alarm penetrated his deadened mind. He forced his eyes open, against a leaden weight of sleep.

And saw black horror crawling out of the water!

Like slender cruel black snakes, the roots of the plant writhed out from beneath the broad floating leaves, and lifted evil coils into the canoe.

The tentacles were creeping toward Ann.

Craig tried to shout a warning. But that strange perfume had paralyzed him. No sound came from his dry throat. And the cold light of the swaying, hypnotic orbs was suddenly stern.

They looked angry. They were like Maddrey's insane glacial eyes. And Craig was afraid of them. It was fear that stiffened all his body with a paralytic rigor.

The black tentacles writhed about Ann's white, sleeping body. Thin shining coils whipped around her limbs. Black circular suction disks—that looked like ugly serpent-heads—fastened to her soft flesh.

She woke, abruptly.

"Weston! Oh, West—"

The sheer, sobbing horror of her cry sent a ripple of agony through Craig's tense, fear-chilled body. Desperately, with all his will, he fought that strange hypnotic rigor. But he could not break it.

As if clutched in some nightmare, he watched helplessly.

The black tentacles lifted Ann. She screamed again, and struggled frantically. The clinging black coils yielded to her struggles, and yet held fast. The suction disks clung, lifted her out of the canoe.

Nerveless, rigid, drenched with cold sweat of horror, Craig could only watch.

He saw the little horny black finger that opposed the suction disk, at the end of each thin tentacle. Those fingers began to explore Ann's body, moving with a slow horrible undulant motion.

Deliberately, they stripped off her ragged clothing. Curiously, they caressed her long white thighs, all the smooth curves of her body, the full ivory bowls of her breasts.

Slowly, cruelly, the black coils grew tighter about her white, fighting loveliness. Like black wires, they cut into her flesh. Red drops oozed from about the black disks cupped against her long white limbs, her breasts, her throat.

Once more she screamed, with the breath forced from her lungs by that crushing pressure. It was a choked, bubbling, awful cry:

"West—Weston!"

The horror of that appeal, somehow, cleft Craig's bonds of dread. Perhaps the hypnotic attention of those icy violet orbs had momentarily shifted from him. He dragged his eyes from them.

He was free!

Snatching the copper knife, that Ann had dropped in the bottom of the canoe, he surged to his feet. She made a last little sob of agony, as those torturing tentacles drew convulsively tighter about her long nude body.

A black whip struck, snake-like, at Craig.

He ducked under it. Catching up the paddle, he drove the canoe with one deep stroke between those thick floating pads. And he leapt from it, into that great bowl of sapphire flame.

THE shining petals closed upon him. They were like cold, boneless flesh. They were silken-soft. Yet they pressed about him with a crushing, smothering strength. And black filaments whipped about his throat, like garroting wires.

Craig gasped for breath. He kept his arms free of the whipping, clinging tentacles. The copper blade slashed again and again, ripping at the heart of the monster calyx.

The struggles of bright petals and black whips became convulsive, as if with agony. Craig was drenched in a viscid, sickly-sweet liquid. It was like unpleasant blood.

Abruptly the smothering petals opened again. He was flung out into warm red water. Maddened black limbs were beating it to crimson froth. A writhing coil gripped him, dragged him beneath the surface.

Strangling, he clutched it with one hand, hacked at it desperately. Something snatched at his foot—some deadly, unseen denizen of the river. He kicked free of it. The clinging tentacle parted.

Half drowned, he fought his way upward.

The sentient plant had become a frightful mass of agony and death. Black tentacles were rending the thick green pads. The giant, ice-blue bloom had toppled into the water. Swiftly, uncannily, the blue glow died. The petals withered, blackened.

"Ann!" Craig was breathless, hoarse with an awful apprehension. "Ann—Ann!"

The empty canoe was floating away. Bubbles broke out of the frothy crimson water. The dying tentacles had dragged Ann under.

CHAPTER IX

FLIGHT'S END

AGAIN Craig felt the brush of some alert, quick-moving thing beneath the unquiet water. Unseen jaws closed on his ankle, with an agonizing pressure. Once more he was drawn beneath the red-frothing surface.

He doubled himself, slashed down with the copper blade. It raked against an armored body. He kicked out desperately, came free. Back at the surface, gasping for breath, he searched for Ann again.

And still she was gone.

Chilled with apprehension, Craig caught his breath. He dived again. His eyes were open, but he could see only a few feet through the stinging murky crimson. Gripping the knife, he pulled himself down. Down. He felt the foul mud of the bottom.

Then a slender, greenly shining antenna touched him with stinging pain. He glimpsed the hideous, black-armored thing where frightful jaws had caught Ann's naked body. A monstrous, crab-like crustacean.

Huge stalked eyes peered at him, above her feebly struggling limbs. They were crimson moons of evil. Craig swam toward them, stabbing with the copper knife. Green antennae whipped at him, agonizing as Maddrey's venomous lash.

His dull blade failed to penetrate the tough black armor. His breath was gone. Fire was in his lungs. The water was a crushing, oppressive weight. It flowed into his nostrils,

stranglingly.

Then a twisting mass of wire-like coils sank down through the dusky redness—black tentacles torn from the dying plant. They touched the hideous dark-armored crab-thing, struck, clung.

Frightful jaws released the nude girl, flashed at Craig. He slashed at the stalked eyes. One evil red moon was severed. The monster let him go, fighting the dying tentacles.

Craig seized Ann's arm, fought toward the surface. They came up, at last. Ann still clung to consciousness. For a little time they floated in the oily red foam, gasping for breath.

Then Craig saw that the canoe's anchor rope had been cut or broken, in the battle. It was drifting out, toward the swift current that swept back toward the crimson sea. He released the girl, overtook it, paddled frantically back to pick up Ann before she was attacked again.

She screamed in the red water, before he could reach her.

"Oh, West—something—"

He drove the canoe to her side, pulled her safely aboard. She was shivering with exhaustion and shock. One ankle was marked by the jaws of the giant crustacean. Her white throat, her back, and her breasts, all were marked with little red circles, from the sucking disks of the deadly flower.

Craig gave her his wet jacket.

"I think we had better paddle upriver a way, before we rest again," he said breathlessly. "To a quieter vicinity."

She saw his little weary grin.

"You aren't angry, Weston?" she whispered. "It's all my fault! I saw the flower coming. But something made me go to sleep."

Craig managed to smile.

"I'm glad," he gasped. "Almost glad it happened. You know, Ann—I wasn't afraid when I dived after you. It's the

first time I haven't been afraid."

The troglodyte rose again. Squatting on a snag near the bank, it had watched the struggle in the river, blinking evil yellow-red eyes. It flew low above, as they paddled on, hissing and screaming.

BENEATH those green, ominous wings, Craig and Ann went ahead. They fought an ever-swifter current. It was impossible to advance against it in the middle of the stream. They were forced back into the perilous shallows, in the shadow of the walling, many-colored jungle.

Always they were tired, and always tense with an unresting alertness. They were often hungry. Always sleepless, cramped and aching. But they struggled on, beneath the evil wings.

A time came at last when their flapping follower was joined by two others. Looking back across a mighty bend of the dark river, they saw a wheeling swarm of the green-winged troglodytes.

On the water beneath was a little black dot.

Craig bent hard to the paddle, and Ann took turns. But the swarm gained on them. The dot grew larger. At last they could distinguish Maddrey's great bulk, bent over his flashing paddle.

"Maddrey!"

Ann was hoarse with a chilling dread.

"We'll never get away from him—and his whip!"

They had no measure of their flight's duration. But they had eaten and slept imnumerable times. Their flesh had been wounded, healed, freshly wounded and healed again, until each of them bore many old scars.

Craig knew that his body had been hardened by his battle with the river. A kind of daring hardihood had been born in him, when he fought the black spiders on the hill of moons, and when he dived under the river for Ann, and on a hundred like occasions.

He had even hoped, sometimes, that fear was gone. But always, listening again to the hissing of the troglodyte above, he had felt that man's grim heritage still clung to him. Now—when he saw that it was Maddrey indeed in the canoe behind—he knew that fear had been only sleeping.

It came upon him with a sickness that left him weak and trembling. Then it touched him with a terrible strength. He dipped the paddle again, and began a desperate race.

Maddrey, with his swarm of monstrous allies, gained steadily. Still he had a madman's strength. But the race was not ended when they reached the second fall.

Ann gasped at the spectacle that marched out of the arch of gloom ahead. A white pillar of water came down out of utter darkness. It made a cloud of snowy spray upon the center of a broad, jungle-rimmed lake. The surface of the lake was queerly mottled, with white froth and dull blood-red luminescence.

The voice of the water was a deafening thunder.

Craig stopped paddling. His eyes were fearful.

"Looks like the end," he shouted to Ann. "It's the end of the river." He peered about, with frantic eyes. "And we can't get through that jungle. We're caught—between Maddrey and the fall!"

"There must be a way!"

Ann's dark, frightened eyes looked at the white booming column that dropped through the roof of the cave. It must fall a thousand sheer feet. No way there!

Then hope stiffened her.

"There!" Her eager cry cleft the voice of the waters. "Beyond the fall—"

Staring through that terrible, thundering curtain, Craig dimly saw the shore beyond. There was a break in

the jungle. A mysterious dark slope mounted into black infinity.

"That's the way!" he shouted. "If we can pass the fall—"

The flapping swarm of troglodytes was close behind him. Faintly, above the thunder of the waters, Craig could hear their sinister screaming. Paddling, he could not look back. But Ann's white face was drawn and terrible with fear.

Dimly, above the roaring, he heard Maddrey's voice. Rusty, it seemed, and strange, as if from lack of use. And it held all of the mad violence of an infuriated bull.

"Wire the disk—and you may live!"

CRAIG raced on. He read the warning in the streak of white that abruptly cleft the scarlet water. But there was no escape. Maddrey was too close behind. Craig bent his back, shot the canoe into the deadly current.

"Stop!"

Maddrey's bellow was faint, beneath that tremendous sound, as the whisper of a child.

"Stop—or perish!"

Craig caught his breath, and drove ahead. A great hand flung the bow aside, so swiftly that he could hardly keep them upright. The deadly jungle swept past in a racing blur.

Ahead lay the swift white road of the current, running straight into the fearful, crashing turmoil of white water and smothering mist beneath the fall. Tossing mountains of spray hid all beyond.

Desperately, Craig fought to cross that deadly current.

The roaring drowned all sound of Ann's voice. But he read the words from her pale, frightened lips:

"He came on—he's close behind!"

Fainter than a breath, he heard a troglodyte's scream.

His muscles cracked to the effort of his paddle strokes. Yet all his strength

seemed in vain against the terrific force that hurled them toward the fall.

White foam broke over the gunwales. Cold spray drenched them. Violent beyond the meaning of sound, the vibration of crashing tons of water battered and deafened and dazed them.

Ann was bailing frantically. Despite all Craig's efforts, the canoe was swept aside. It spun like a top. He lost all sense of direction.

Snap!

The paddle was a useless stick in his hands. The splintered, smooth-worn handle dropped from nerveless fingers. Craig looked up helplessly, to face the white death of hurtling water.

But that pillar of supernal sound and fury was suddenly behind. Another freakish current had swept them away. One moment of safety!

Craig bent again. Frantically he paddled with his hands, toward the low dark shore. Another mad torrent caught the canoe. A white plume of spray gave him warning of the rock.

He stood up, swayed to grasp Ann's arm.

Crash!

The canoe struck the rock, with a shocking, splintering force. Craig leapt at the impact, lifting Ann. Amid flying fragments of the shattered canoe, they were flung over the rock.

Cold black water swallowed them.

Still clinging to Ann, Craig battled back to the surface. He found himself in the eddy beyond the rock. Behind was the fall, with savage currents racing into the chaos of spray beneath it. Ahead was the dark slope they had glimpsed—

The way, might it be, to the world above?

His frantic feet touched bottom. Ann found her footing, and they waded ashore. Shivering with unaccustomed cold, they looked back. Ann uttered a little sobbing moan of fear.

A long canoe drove out of the mist, attended by a green-winged, monstrous horde.

"Maddrey!" whispered Ann. "He'll never give up!"

They stumbled up the dark slope. It was barren of any luminiferous life. A faint light came up across it, however, from the dully shining jungle beyond the fall.

Rugged, water-carved rocks grew steeper ahead. The sheer, cragged walls narrowed upon them, and the black roof pressed lower. The way became an appalling, constricted maw of darkness.

"A tunnel?" Still Ann was hopeful. "A passage?"

"Once it was a passage." Craig peered into the blackness, doubtfully. "Once the river flowed through here. But the water has stopped. The passage may be closed—"

Another apprehension turned his glance behind.

HE saw Maddrey's canoe. The black-bearded giant steered it around the menace of the rocks, drove it across the eddy, beached it safely. Maddrey followed them up the slope, with his horde of flapping reptiles.

Craig broke icy fetters of fear. Gasping for breath, he seized Ann's arm. Panting, they stumbled up the slope. Soon their bodies were aching from the unwonted effort of running.

A wall of black granite halted them.

Frantically, they searched to right and left, peered above. But the boulder blocked the way, with a million tons of stone.

"So this is the end!"

Craig's whisper was faint and dry with dread.

"This was the way—once. Until that boulder fell—maybe a million years ago. The river found a new way—down through the roof.

"But we—we're corpered!"

They waited beneath the rock, for Maddrey and his monsters.

CHAPTER X

THE MAN AFRAID

BATHED in a weird, flickering green, from the flapping wings of his hideous retainers, Maddrey came plunging up the dark slope. Blackened from exposure, scarred from old wounds, his huge hairy body was still powerful. His bearded face was seamed, haggard. Into his mad blue eyes had come a new feral wildness.

In one great hand he gripped a massive club of black wood, copper-studded. A copper knife gleamed in his broad crimson belt. The shining purple whip was looped at his side. Slung from his shoulders was the heavy rusted mechanism of the disruptor disk.

A hundred feet beneath Craig and Ann, Maddrey paused. Above the hissing screams of his wheeling reptiles, his mighty voice bellowed at them:

"Come back with me. Repair the *Subterrane*. Or die—both of you—by the whip!"

Craig held Ann close to him.

"No, Maddrey," he shouted. "We'll fight to the finish."

Ann sensed a new calm in his voice. She felt the steadiness of his arm. Wonder came into her dark, frightened eyes.

"West?" she breathed softly. "You aren't afraid?"

Craig smiled down at her, briefly.

"Something has happened," he whispered. "It was the same, that time I dived. I am afraid, of course—because he may kill us both. But it's different. I'm not afraid—of fear."

The girl made a breathless sob of dread, and he looked back down the rugged slope, at Maddrey. The shaggy, haggard giant had lifted the rust-red-

dened disruptor disk in both great hands. He was swinging it, threateningly, at the flapping reptiles.

His voice hissed and screamed, in their own strange speech. The monsters squalled and hissed back at him, as if protestingly. But at last a dozen of them came flapping up the slope.

Gripping the copper knife, Craig stepped a little forward. He drew Ann close behind him. Warm against him, her body was quivering with fear.

"Oh, Weston!" she sobbed. "He *can't* take us back—not after we've come so far!"

The shrieking reptiles dropped upon them. Their acrid, snake-house stench was sickening. Their bright wings whipped up choking dust from the rocks. Half blinded, Craig thrust with the copper blade, slashed and thrust again.

But the monsters evaded his blows. Their dives were always checked, above him. No talon raked him, and he felt no fang. The knife was a feeble weapon, yet the reptiles seemed to fear it.

Then Ann screamed!

Craig wheeled, beneath the threatening wings. And horror paralyzed him. For a diving monster had snatched the girl from behind him. It soared up, with her struggling form dangling from its talons.

Breathless with apprehension, forgetting his own defense, Craig stood staring. For Ann's sake, he knew, he would surrender. For her, he would become the slave of Maddrey's madness. He would even repair the *Subterrane*.

Ann fought desperately, against the talons of the monster. It had gripped her by the shoulders. The worn skins of her clothing ripped. Her long-limbed body fell out of them, white and nude.

Craig's heart stopped.

The creature had carried her scores of feet above the rocks. Her naked, help-

less body spun in the air, falling. Craig's horror-dazed mind saw her lovely shape broken hideously, mangled.

She screamed once, in the air.

Then the troglodyte dropped her torn garments. It dived after her. A few feet above the rocks, its talons caught her again, by arm and thigh. It checked her fall, lifted her again.

The green flicker of its wings turned her to a statue of living jade. The strange light shimmered on the curves of her slim body, made full jade bowls of her pointed breasts.

The monster carried her down to Maddrey.

It hovered, in the air, with her green-lit body dangling. The purple-glowing serpent of the whip struck again, and dark marks of pain leapt once more across her jade perfection. Blood looked black, against the green.

She sobbed, piteously.

"Let her go!"

CRAIG was amazed at the clear strength of his shout. Clutching the dull copper blade, he went plunging down the slope, toward Maddrey. Against the giant's great mace, against the green flame of the disruption ray, and the horde of troglodytes, the copper knife was a futile weapon. But Craig's old, crippling fear was gone.

Maddrey hissed a command. The winged monster dropped beside him, still clutching the nude, whimpering girl in its talons. Then his great hands leveled the rusty disruptor disk at Craig.

"Stop!" he bellowed. "Or die!"

Craig's leaping body tensed with expectation of that green, dazzling finger of death. Time had been when its threat might have checked him, with shuddering fear. But now he sprang aside, crouched, ran on.

And Maddrey dropped the disk.

The disruptor weapon was dead, Craig realized elatedly. Useless. The cavern's hot, humid atmosphere must have corroded the terminals. Maddrey's dominion of the troglodytes now lay upon an empty threat.

But nothing was wrong with Maddrey's copper-studded club. Bellowing with rage, he swung it high. Craig darted to meet his lumbering rush.

The club came down. Craig caught it with a stiffened arm. He slashed with the copper blade at the great hairy hand that clutched it. Howling with pain, Maddrey dropped the club.

His bleeding fingers snatched for the purple whip. Viciously it lashed out. Craig slashed again with the copper blade. The glowing, venomous serpent dropped lifeless on the rocks. Maddrey stood with the butt in his red hand.

A slow, stupid bewilderment came over his black-bearded face.

"Make them turn her loose!" Craig gasped.

Maddrey flung away the whipstock, clenched his red empty hands.

"No!" he bellowed. "The trogs can take you!"

He stumbled back from the menace of Craig's copper blade, screaming and hissing in the language of the reptiles. The monsters dropped about him, in a baleful circle. They flapped green wings for balance, and blinked malignant eyes at Craig.

But they didn't attack.

Gripping the knife, Craig advanced suddenly upon the monster that held the naked girl. Croaking and spitting evilly, it released her and retreated. Lovely as an awakened statue of green jade, she ran trembling back to Craig. He gave her his jacket.

"Weston!" Her whisper was electric with hope. "They're afraid of you!"

Gray eyes shining, Craig nodded.

"Yes, they're afraid. They'll never attack mankind."

He stepped confidently toward the glowering giant.

"Maddrey!" His voice was low and even. "I've been afraid of you. I used to obey your orders, because I was afraid. It was fear that drove us up the river. But now I'm not afraid of you, any more."

"I could kill you, Maddrey."

His thumb was testing the copper blade.

"But I'm not even afraid to let you live," he added softly. "You may go back, if you like. And take your monsters with you!"

Maddrey's clenched hands opened. Suddenly he was trembling. Wild, blood-shot, his eyes rolled about the circle of hissing, blinking troglodytes.

Maddrey was afraid!

He fell on his knees and began to sob:

"I want to go with you! Please take me with you! The trogs want to keep me. I can never escape them—unless you take me. But they're afraid of you. They would let me go with you."

"What's this?" Craig gasped. "You aren't the master?"

Maddrey whimpered, on his knees.

"They found out long ago that the disruptor disk was dead," he whispered. "And they knew that you had built it. That made them set you above me. And they have feared you, since you killed one of them and fed it to the water spiders."

"They want to keep me, for a slave."

THE blinking troglodytes were flapping and hopping closer. Maddrey cowered away from them. His sobbing voice rose to a fear-tortured shriek:

"Don't let them carry me back!"

Craig was touched with pity. He looked at Ann, saw compassion on her white face.

"You may stay with us, Maddrey," he said. "If you like. But the way out

is blocked. Perhaps we'll never—"

The ring of troglodytes stalked closer upon Maddrey. They flapped and blinked at him, cackled and hissed and screamed. He flung himself flat on the rocks, shrieking:

"Don't—don't let them—"

The clamoring circle closed upon him. Maddrey's frantic cries changed to the language of the troglodytes. Green wings flapped heavily, and the dread swarm lifted. Maddrey's big body hung limply from great black talons.

So the troglodytes departed.

They glided down toward the scarlet, foam-flecked darkness of the river. They passed the thundering white pillar of the fall. They soared over the flat, hostile wall of shining jungle beyond.

The one that carried Maddrey wearied. Another flew close, and took the burden. They became black motes. They vanished, returning with their human slave to the far-off dwelling-pits beyond the scarlet sea.

Solemnly, Craig drew Ann to him, and kissed her.

"We are free," he told her gravely. "Even if we die here, we won't be afraid again."

Presently they searched once more for some crevice in the ancient rock-fall that blocked the way. They found none. Ann was growing hopeless and depressed again, when Craig led the way back to the rusty disruptor disk that Maddrey had flung away.

"It's dead," she said wearily. "It doesn't work."

"The terminals probably just need cleaning," he told her. "If Maddrey had known—"

He repressed a little shudder.

They carried the disk back down into the glow of the jungle. Craig took it apart, scraped the terminals. He assembled it again, touched the switch. A dazzling lance of emerald stabbed

down into the jungle.

The green beam stabbed its uncanny way through the black barrier of granite. They made torches, and packed a little food that they found in Maddrey's canoe. Eagerly, they climbed into the forbidding darkness of the caverns.

For a long time they clambered up through utter, choking blackness. They wandered through endless labyrinthine corridors, where their torches flickered against unimaginable crystal splendor. They forded cold black rivers. They swam the length of an icy lake.

Their food was gone. The last torch went out. They crept blindly ahead, hungry, weary, desperate. They stumbled upon the lip of some unthinkable abyss, and the disruptor disk was lost.

They climbed black boulder-slopes. Climbed vertical ledges. Climbed narrow chimneys. Climbed into an eternal nightmare of weary despair. Climbed and staggered, climbed and rested, climbed and wept. And climbed.

Then came the time when Craig sniffed the long-forgotten aroma of tobacco, and came fumbling in the dark upon the butt of a cigarette. Beyond it, they found a low curb of stone, a smooth, well-trodden trail.

Eagerly, incredulous, they stumbled upward.

Light met them, and magical human voices.

They came upon a tall man in uniform, leading an awed and foot-sore throng.

"Yes, sir," the ranger-guide was informing a perspiring and somewhat apprehensive merchant, "the Carlsbad

Cavern is the largest in the world. Just below us is the Big Room. It is 348 feet high, 625 feet wide, and over 4,000 feet long—"

THE ranger's mouth fell open. He staggered back against the merchant. A curious whisper ran through his flock. A fat woman shrieked and fainted. Craig grinned.

"We've been lost in the caves," he said. "Some of them, below, are even larger than the Big Room. We've been lost a long time. We need food and clothing. And Ann is very tired. We've no money, but—"

Ann laughed at him, gaily, saying: "But we will have money!"

She loosened the black shining mass of her hair, and found a little pouch, made from the skin of that great lizard that Craig had killed with the copper knife. She unrolled the pouch. Out poured four splendid moons of scarlet opalescence.

"Pearls!" gasped Craig. "Red pearls! But—where—?"

"They were in the shells you dived for," she told him. "I hid them when I found them—so that we couldn't go back to Maddrey's whip!"

Laughing softly, she sank into his arms.

"I'll forgive you, this time," whispered Craig. "But, any more deceit—"

She shuddered deliciously.

The rangers helped them up the trail, into bright New Mexico sun. Craig asked the date, and learned that it had been four years since the *Subterrane* carried them into the Earth.

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LOOK FOR THE RED CIRCLE ON THE COVER!

UNCANNY TALES

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW—Written especially for this magazine.

SENSATIONAL FUTURE-SCIENCE NOVELET OF SEX-RULE REDEMPTION

WORLD WITHOUT SEX

BY ROBERT WENTWORTH

Author of "The Key to Doom," etc.

Could Rann Haddan save the male sex from extermination—would the tactics his forefathers had used four thousand years ago serve to calm the fury of the ruling females?



Rann wrested the atom-pistol from the girl's hand and clouted her with it

THE courtroom looked as cold and hard as the inside of a machine. Its silvery ferrochromium walls and ceiling reflected chillily the daylight from a big triple window. That window framed a vista of the city outside, of colossal cubical buildings and swarming fliers. And underneath that window at a square ferrochromium desk the four female judges sat and looked down on the last twelve men on earth.

The twelve men were clad like all the others in the room in the hygienic white shirts and shorts everyone had worn for centuries. They stood in a silent, dejected little group except for one of the younger men. He stood a little in

front of his fellows, a sturdy young figure whose feet were planted wide apart, whose hands were clenched, and whose dark head was thrown back as with bitter hate and defiance in his strong face and black eyes he stared back up at the judges.

On either side of the twelve prisoners was drawn up a column of female guards armed with stubby atom-pistols.

The chief judge lifted her austere, perfect face from the papers before her and addressed the men.

"You have been found guilty of rebelling against the orders of the Ruling Council," she stated.

"Have you anything to say before

sentence is pronounced on you?"

Rann Haddan, the defiant young man in front, took a step forward, looking up at her with burning eyes.

"I have something to say, yes," he said in a taut, controlled voice. "Something I've long wanted to say to all you females."

"What is there to say, Rann?" asked Berk Ennel, the blond young man behind him, hopelessly. "Let them get it over with."

"Yes, let them end it," murmured white-haired old Kim Ivan wearily. "I grow tired standing."

Rann Haddan did not heed them but looked up at the judges with the bitterness of his dark, strong face deepened.

"What I have to say is this: By what right do you females doom the last of us to death?"

"We rebelled against your Ruling Council, it is true. But why should we not when your Council was set on ending our sex?"

The chief judge answered coldly, "Your accusation is entirely baseless. The Council's decisions have in no case been motivated by sex-animosity."

A bitter smile crossed Rann Haddan's face. "You females say that now that you have deliberately brought our sex to its end."

"Why, it was we males who long ago gave you the power to do this! It was male scientists who four thousand years ago discovered how to isolate the female germ-cell or ovum in the laboratory and fertilize it artificially there without need of the male principle."

"It was male scientists who developed the process so that the resulting infant's sex could be controlled at will, and who so perfected it that within a thousand years all the children in the world were being born in birth-laboratories, and natural birth had ceased."

"When gradually, in result, the sexual instinct became atrophied and sex-

ual association between men and women died out, even then we males were willing to share the world amicably with your sex. But you desired dominance, you schemed and planned so that the laboratories produced more and more females and fewer and fewer males.

"And when we saw that production of males had stopped entirely, that only a few thousand males were left, and demanded of the Council that it order more males produced, it refused. We were justified in rebelling then, in trying to seize some of the birth-laboratories! Yet for that, for trying to prevent the extinction of our sex, your guards killed all of us except we who stand here!"

The chief judge's chill face was completely unmoved as Rann Haddan's passionate voice stopped.

SHE said metallically, "All of this is beside the point. You are not here as males but as citizens of the World State.

"You have rebelled against its Ruling Council, and that crime carries with it the penalty of death."

She paused, and even the cold, silent courtroom seemed to become a little more silent before she spoke again.

"It is our sentence that you be executed by a firing squad at the end of the usual twenty-four hour interval. Guards, return them to their cells."

Rann Haddan, his face flushed dark red and his hands working, moved toward the judges' desk. Quickly an atom-pistol prodded his back and a guard's voice snapped an order. He slowly stepped back and joined the others, but his deadly black eyes did not leave those of the chief judge as they were marched out of the courtroom.

A few minutes later, down in the artificially-lit world of cement and metal beneath the big building, he and the

others were thrust back into the two cells from which they had been taken. The girl-guards watched, their hard young bodies alert and their hard eyes vigilant, until the heavy ferrochromium doors were locked on them.

Rann Haddan walked over to the high, barred window of the cell and looked up at its square of sunset sky, his inflexible face set like dark metal. The other five men in the cell seated themselves on the bunks silently, old Kim Ivan uttering a weary sigh.

The guards could be heard marching away out in the hall. Rann Haddan turned, looked from one of the silent men to another.

"Twenty-four hours," he said, softly and slowly. "Twenty-four hours and then we end, the male sex ends."

They remained silent. On every face as he shifted his gaze he saw weary hopelessness and despair.

"But we're not going to end!" he exclaimed tautly. "Those damned females are not going to put an end to our sex forever!"

Old Kim Ivan stirred a little and spoke. "I know how you feel, Rann," he said, his voice heavy but kind. "But there's nothing we can do now.

"We had but one chance and lost it when we were unable to seize any of the birth-laboratories. Now it's all ended and over."

"It's *not* over!" Rann Hadden insisted fiercely. "We're not going to let our sex come to an end like this. We males who for a half-million years ruled the world, who pulled humanity up out of animalism and savagery, are not going to be wiped out now forever."

His dark face set hard and he spoke in hard, deliberate syllables. "We're not going to face that firing-squad. We're going to get out of here and survive—the male sex is going to survive."

They sat without answering in the semi-dusk of the darkening cell for

some moments. Then blond Berk Ennel spoke slowly.

"What good would it do us if we did escape the firing-squad? How could we twelve hope to seize a birth-laboratory?"

"Yes," said Don Noston, another of the men. "We could not do it when there were some thousand of us. How do it now?"

Rann Hadden leaned toward them, his black eyes snapping with purpose.

"We would not try to seize any birth-laboratory. We would escape to the hills beyond the uninhabited plain, and once established there we would produce new males ourselves."

THEY stared at him. "Impossible!" Kim Ivan said. "Why, only the scientists who are trained for years for the task are able to carry on the complex work of producing children.

"How could we, without laboratories or equipment, without the necessary knowledge and formulae, ever hope to do it?"

"We would not have to produce children as they do," Rann Hadden answered. "We could do it in another way."

"Another way?"

Rann's mouth set. "Yes, the way they used four thousand years ago. We could take females with us by force, mate with them, and they would produce children in the old natural way."

The men stared at him in incredulity with which was mingled a horrified disgust.

It was as though he had suddenly flung into their midst a suggestion of something utterly indecent, utterly repulsive.

Berk Ennel was first to voice their feelings. "Mate with females as they did in the old days? Faugh!—it would be beastly!"

"It would be a way to keep the male

sex living, and the only way!" lashed Rann Haddan passionately.

"Do you think that I like the idea? But it's the one way open to us and if we want our sex to survive we've got to take it."

"Out there in the hills we can slowly build up a little hidden community, with more and more males. When our numbers and power are great enough, we can come back to the cities and force the laboratories to produce more males in the normal manner, can come back to see our sex again a power in the world!"

They were silent, their reaction of disgusted distaste struggling with their recognition of the force of his words.

Berk Ennel said, "But after all, we're locked up here under death-sentence. How do you expect even to get out of here?"

"I think we can do that," Rann Haddan answered. "But some of us are going to die in trying it."

They looked unspeakingly at him for a little. Then Don Noston said, "We're all to die in any case tomorrow. What is your plan?"

Rann Haddan rapidly explained. He saw their faces change as they heard. But all agreed to join in it.

They waited in silence until complete darkness had fallen and the buzz of swarming fliers in the sky had lessened. Then Rann Hadden gave a silent signal and he and Berk Ennel took their places just inside the ferrochromium door of the cell.

They began to argue, gradually raising their voices. Berk Ennel accused Rann of leading them into the revolt that would now cost them their lives. They raised their voices to angry, semi-hysterical pitch and then fell to a struggling bodily, wrestling and striking. Berk Ennel began to utter gasping, choking sounds.

A guard came running outside the door, listened, and then called aloud.

"Luse! Norua!"

They heard other female guards hastily arrive. "What is it, Ala?" asked the authoritative voice of one.

"The prisoners kill each other! Quick, open the door and stand on guard!"

The door clicked open and a half-dozen female guards appeared in it, their atom-pistols raised alertly.

Two bent over the struggling Rann Haddan and Berk Ennel while the others kept the other four men covered with their pistols.

The cell suddenly exploded with mad action. Rann Haddan seized the pistol-wrist of one of the girl-guards bending over him and that touched off a swift, wild struggle. Atom-pistols blasted white streaks of fire as the four other men leaped for the guards, and two males went down but the others reached the females and grappled with them.

Rann Haddan got the stubby pistol from the girl's hand and clouted her head with it. As she crumpled he scrambled up and fired at one of the guards who had got free and was aiming at him. Berk Ennel and the other males had knocked out all the other guards but one, who ran out into the hall yelling the alarm.

RANN HADDAN ran out after her and fired down the hall after her. As she fell, he leaped to the door of the next cell and blasted open the lock with his pistol.

The six men in that cell came tumbling out, white-faced and tense. Rann Haddan ran back to the door of the other cell.

"Come on, we've got to get up to the roof and seize a flier before the alarm spreads!" he cried.

"We'll take these four females — we've not time to try to capture more!"

They grasped the four girl-guards, who were wholly or partially uncon-

scious, snatched up the atom-pistols, and started on a stumbling run along the hall toward the elevators.

Two female guards emerged from an elevator suddenly as they reached them. Their pistols whizzed death and two males went down in scorched heaps before Rann Haddan and Berk Ennel fired and dropped them.

They slung their captives hastily into the metal chamber of the elevator, were the next instant whizzing upward. Cries of alarm were sounded in the vast building, and an alarm bell began to ring sharply.

When they burst out onto the roof and into sight of the vast blinking lights of the huge city, domed by the blinking stars, pursuit was clamorous in the building beneath them.

Rann Haddan led the way to one of the big, torpedo-shaped fliers parked on the roof. They tumbled in and Berk Ennel slammed shut the door as Rann leaped to the controls. Under his frantic hands the controls clicked, white atomic fire shot back from the propulsion-tubes.

The flier jerked sharply up into the night, throwing its occupants into a heap. It screamed low across the roofs of the city, its white fire-streams pluming behind it, Rann Haddan hunched tensely over its controls.

Behind it was diminishing clamor and uproar. Rann heard Berk Ennel cry something about pursuit and glanced back to see gleaming dots that jetted tiny fire-threads curving up after them. He headed the flier straight west.

A lithe, muscular young arm suddenly circled his neck from behind and squeezed fiercely. The flier dived sickeningly as he released the controls to claw at the choking arm.

Berk Ennel leaped over and smote with his pistol-butt the girl-guard who had come to and tried to strangle Rann. She sank down.

"Keep those damn females quiet, will you?" cried Rann as he grabbed the controls and sent the flier climbing steeply again.

"What about the fliers behind?" he cried a moment later.

"We're almost out of sight of them!" Berk Ennel answered. "Give her all she's got."

The propulsion-tubes blasted deafeningly as he opened the power to the last notch. They rocketed at tremendous speed from over the great city, out over the dark, uninhabited plain.

As they cometed onward through the night, the great bed of blinking lights behind contracted quickly. It became a mere glow back in the darkness, and then that too disappeared. They had apparently shaken off all pursuit, but the craft continued to arrow on over the dark plain at unabated speed.

Morning found them still flying over the green flat expanse that lapped the horizon in east, south, and north. In the west, ahead of them, dim and distant rocky brown hills rose to break the skyline.

In the gray morning light they were a tired, weary-looking company. The eight men were nearly all a little scorched or bruised, and the four females were in the same condition. Old Kim Ivan was sleeping exhaustedly in a corner of the craft while his companions watched.

The girl who had almost throttled Rann Haddan during their escape, and whose relentless young face and chill blue eyes still blazed with cold fury, watched him like a trapped young tigress.

"You males will not live two minutes when our fliers find you, for this!" she told him.

"Why did you bring us with you? Why did you not kill us as treacherously as you killed the others?"

"Quiet, female, or I'll quiet you,"

said Rann Hadden dangerously, raising his pistol by the barrel.

"Be quiet, Ala," said one of the other girl-guards calmly. "They will not live long to hold us prisoners."

THE girl Ala subsided, her eyes still blazing her defiance. Rann Hadden peered down with Berk Ennel at the terrain below.

They were flying now over dense, unbroken forests that covered the shelving ground between the plain and the rocky hills. These forests extended clear to the edge of the brown rock cliffs.

He changed their course and they flew along the edge of the cliffs, looking anxiously for some inviting opening, and at the same time keeping watch on the eastward sky for fliers.

"There's a crack in the cliff!" Berk Ennel suddenly exclaimed. "It's gone now but I saw it."

"I saw it too," Rann said. "We'll land and see what it's like."

They landed a few minutes later in a forest glade near the crack Berk Ennel had glimpsed. It was invisible from all but one position.

Rann Hadden and his companion left the other men to guard their captives and went to investigate it. They soon came back.

"It's an ideal place for us," Rann said rapidly. "A stream has worn that crack through the cliff and at one place has hollowed out a series of small interconnecting caverns.

"We can live in them without much fear of discovery and we will have a water supply and be near the forest for hunting."

"What about the flier?" Don Noston asked.

"We'll hide it in the forest some distance from here," Rann said. "It will be impossible to see it from above."

They found a hiding place for the

craft beneath the dense foliage of great trees a half mile from the crack in the cliff. They left it there and started back toward the cleft, Rann leading and the other men urging the captives along with menacing pistols.

The crack in the cliff was a mere narrow split in the solid rock, at the bottom of which a tiny stream trickled. Far overhead gleamed a thread of daylight. They splashed along, at times forced to go sidewise, until they emerged into a series of caverns the stream had hollowed where had been pockets of softer rock, dusky rock chambers.

Rann Hadden stopped and waited until Berk Ennel and the others had come up. He extended his hand then to the connecting caves.

"This will be our home," he said. "We can hunt with our atom-pistols in the forest for food and we have water here."

"It isn't much like the cities, I know. But we can stand it when we consider what depends on it."

The other men looked around, their faces showing no enthusiasm as they gazed at the rough rock walls of the dusky caverns.

One of the four captives, the girl Ala who had tried to strangle Rann Hadden, spoke to him through her teeth.

"And what about us, male? How long are you going to wait before you kill us?"

Rann Hadden looked at her coldly furious young face. He had to choke down the bitter hate that rose in him, before he replied.

"We're not going to kill you at all," he told her. Then he added slowly, "We're going to take you for our mates."

The girl Ala stared at him with sheer amazement drowning for the moment her fury, an amazement that wrinkled into an expression of disgust as at some-

thing loathsomely unclean.

The same shrinking revoltedness was on the faces of the three other girl-guards, and it shadowed the faces of the men.

"Yes, you heard all right!" flamed Rann Haddan in an anger that he felt partly at his own uncontrollable feeling of repulsion. "We're going to mate with you and you're going to bear children as they did in the old days, natural children, *male* children!"

"Mate with you—as males and females did in the animalistic past?" breathed Ala. Then she choked, "Will you kill us here and now?"

"Yes, kill us before—that!" cried another of the girls.

"Rann, we can't do it," said Berk Ennel sickly. "It's too atavistic, animal—"

"We *will* do it!" Rann Haddan shouted. "No matter how beastly it is, it's a way to save our sex from extinction and we're going to take it."

"We'll draw lots for these four females here and now. Four of us will take them as mates, one to each of us. It may be that later on we can capture more females for mates for the rest of us."

SIENTLY they obeyed. Kim Ivan, who excluded himself from the drawing, prepared the lots for the other seven men.

Rann Haddan drew from the seven sticks the one that represented Ala. Berk Ennel got that of Luse, the dark, calm woman who had been leader of the guards.

Don Noston and Birt Tannis, the other two men to draw mates, drew respectively the females Linni and Norua. Juss Hull and the other two men who had drawn no women breathed sighs of relief.

When the drawing was finished Rann Haddan stood up and strode abruptly

to the captives. They had stood under guard watching the drawing with unbelieving horror on their faces. His face stony-hard with resolve, Rann grasped the wrist of the girl Ala.

"You have fallen as my mate," he told her, his voice as hard as his eyes. "Come with me."

She struggled to free herself, fury and horror in her eyes, as he jerked her toward one of the neighboring caverns.

Rann felt in himself a terrible shrinking as from something ancient and unclean. Yet he dragged her along, his set face unchanged.

The other men and the horror-stricken girls watched as he disappeared with her into the connecting caverns. . . .

The next day Ala snatched Rann Haddan's pistol out of his belt and almost succeeded in killing him with it. A little later Don Noston's mate tried to brain him with a rock. The mad anger of the females was such that the men had to watch them every second.

Rann Haddan tried to establish order. He commanded that one of the men should always stand guard in the entrance of the caverns, and that the men should leave their weapons with him on entering. Another man he posted on top of the cliff to give warning of the approach of female fliers. The rest of the men were to go into the forest each morning to hunt and gather fruits and berries.

A dozen times in the next few days the sentry atop the cliff gave the alarm as fliers were sighted. Each time the men all retreated hastily into the caverns, from which they could hear the whining scream of the craft passing overhead. The fliers were in strong patrols, and their frequency indicated the intensity of the search.

Rann Haddan sensed the utter precariousness of their position. But it only deepened his resolve to keep his

little community alive. His sex was not going to die! His determination made him ruthless with the women, and indeed he found it necessary to bind Ala and the others to prevent them giving the alarm when fliers approached.

The searching fliers seemed to grow fewer as days went by. And the situation inside the caverns changed too. The first flaming fury of the four girls changed into a sullen, smoldering hatred that seemed only biding its time. They never spoke to their mates except when spoken to. Rann saw that Ala sat brooding, hour after hour.

She and the others thrust aside the meats and fruits the men brought back from the forest, and it fell upon old Kim Ivan to do the cooking and to work the hides into skins. For a time the women had refused even to eat, but hunger had conquered them that much.

"Rann, it's useless," said Berk Ennel, shaking his head. "Things can't go on indefinitely this way, with us and the females."

"We're going on with it," answered Rann Haddan with unshakable determination. "We've got to."

Berk Ennel shook his head. "We've been here weeks and I think they hate us worse than ever. Luse makes me cold the way she looks at me sometimes, and Ala hates you even worse."

That night as Rann Haddan slept beside Ala he dreamed a monstrous creature had slipped a tentacle around his throat and was choking him.

He choked, gasped, awoke—to find the strangling thing around his throat still tightening. It was Ala who with a crude rope made of cloth strips was strangling him in the dark.

Rann struggled, clawed at the strangling rope, but she clung to him like a fierce young tigress in the dark. He tried to shout but achieved only a choking whisper. He was rapidly growing unconscious.

With blind last effort he drove his elbows back into her body. She cried out, and the pressure relaxed a little. He got his fingers under the cord, tore it loose, and then turned and grasped her furiously.

"Go ahead and kill me!" she cried. "I'd rather that than to undergo this degradation any longer!"

"I'm not going to kill you," rasped Rann through his teeth. "But I'm going to give you a lesson."

She struck fiercely at him but he held her wrists with one steely hand, and then for five minutes he cuffed her hard in chastisement.

WHEN he finished, breathing hard, his throat still sore, he waited for Ala's fierce maledictions.

Instead Ala put her face down and sobbed, her whole body quivering.

Rann Haddan was astounded. He had never seen her exhibit such weakness before and he was a little disconcerted.

He lay down again and pretended to ignore her, but rapidly her quivering sobs got on his nerves.

He raised himself on his elbow. "Stop it!" he ordered harshly.

She continued to sob. "If you don't stop—" he threatened, but she paid him no heed.

He extended his hand angrily to grasp and shake her. In the dark his fingers touched her tear-wet face.

He paused. He felt suddenly a prey to strange emotions, dim promptings of pity that came from he knew not where. Slowly, without knowing why he did it, he stroked her cheek comfortingly.

Her sobs checked a little. Rann Haddan, astonished by his own actions, put his arm around her and drew her to him. She resisted a little, then buried her sobbing face against his shoulder. Holding her, he felt an unfamiliar new warmth at his heart.

Ala was different after that, and soon the other women too were different. They accepted their new life gradually, talked and sometimes laughed around the stone fireplaces where now they did the cooking. Old Kim Ivan dozed contentedly in the sunshine now.

The searching fliers came less and less often. Rann Haddan lost his first fears of their community being found, and visioned it growing into a larger and larger force of males who would some day yet be able to seize a city and establish the male sex again.

Nights they sat around the fire in the biggest cavern, a strange yet not unhappy little company. Kim Ivan told tales of the dim past when all humanity had lived in this fashion. Rann Haddan, sitting with Ala's head against his knee, dreamed of the time when they should go back and again seize dominance for his sex.

He came home one night to find that Ala was not in the main cavern. He found her in their own, sitting in a corner staring into the dark.

"What's the matter, Ala?" he asked, putting his arm around her.

She pushed him fiercely back. "Go away from me, male!"

He was astonished, puzzled. "But Ala—"

She would not speak, and he went puzzledly back to the main cavern. The others looked strangely at him, the women accusingly.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked.

When they told him, his mind lit with soaring exultation.

"A child? But that is wonderful! And it is only the first that will be born!"

He went back to Ala and tried to comfort her. "Do not be afraid, Ala. Once all children in the world were born this way."

"It is horrible—I wish you had killed

me," she choked, and then began to cry.

He held her and petted her. His mind was full of plans. The child would be a boy, must be a boy. The first new male!"

He could think of nothing else after that but the coming birth. He built endless new plans. This would be the male sex's first step back to power.

But when it came, when he heard Ala moaning pitifully inside the cave where Kim Ivan and the women did what they could, Rann Haddan did not think for a time of his plans.

He could only think of how much Ala was being hurt. He was shaking a little when Kim Ivan came out and gestured him to enter.

Ala lay very white and weak on the skin couch beside the fire, clutching a shapeless little bundle to her.

She looked up tiredly but contentedly as he bent over her, touching her clumsily and searching for words.

But when he sought to lift the little bundle she held, she clutched it tighter.

"No, you must not—you will be too rough!" She exclaimed anxiously.

"But I can see, can't I?" Rann Haddan exclaimed.

SHE unwrapped the ragged coverings a little and let him see. He stared fascinatedly at the baby.

It seemed to Rann red and scrawny in comparison with the birth-laboratory infants. It squalled lustily, though.

"Isn't she beautiful?" asked Ala, her tired eyes radiant with pride.

A horrible suspicion came to Rann at her words. "She?" he repeated.

Kim Ivan coughed apologetically. "The child is a female, Rann. It is unfortunate but—"

Rann did not hear the rest. He straightened, walked out of the cavern, his mind sick with bitter shock of disappointment.

The irony of it sank into his soul.

He had never dreamed for a moment that the child would be aught but a male. It had seemed that after the superhuman efforts he had made, simply that new males might be produced, it would have to be male.

And it was female! His visioned first step back to power, his high-built plans, were shattered for the time. He sat brooding by the fire, and for two whole days he would not go into the cavern where Ala and the child were.

He finally conquered his bitter disappointment enough to go in. After all, it was not Ala's fault.

But when she extended the baby toward him he thrust it back.

"I don't want it. Why couldn't it have been a male?"

"I am sorry, truly I am sorry, Rann," said Ala. "Perhaps the next one will be a male."

"Besides," she added with a little defiance, "she is beautiful even though she is a female."

Rann Haddan stared gloomily down at the little wretch. He could see nothing beautiful about it, and said so.

It slept, and in its sleep moved its little limbs jerkily, aimlessly. It looked ridiculously soft and helpless.

One of its hands touched Rann's wrist, as he stood there. The tiny fingers clutched it warmly.

Rann stood looking down and suddenly he seemed to see the child for the first time. For the first time there came to him a realization that this was his and Ala's.

He, he and Ala, had created it themselves out of nothing, without laboratories or formulae. Somehow that seemed vastly important, seemed to draw him illogically to it. There was no reason why it should, he told himself, but it did.

He stood staring down at it until Ala noticed that it had clutched his wrist. She anxiously sought to withdraw its

fingers.

"I did not know she had done that," she said apologetically.

Rann stopped her. "Let her alone," he said, and then added severely, "Do you want to wake her?"

They called the little girl Teena. Soon it was crowing loudly, rolling fat and laughing in the corner of the cavern.

And soon there were other infants in the little community, too. Berk Ennel's dark wife, Luse, and Don Nosten's mate, Linni, gave birth and both of them to sons.

Rann Haddan was glad. They were the first males born on earth for many years, and they meant the beginning of the realization of his dreams of going back. Yet he was not as overjoyed as once he would have been.

"Berk Ennel's child and Don Nosten's are fine children and they are males but they do not seem to have Teena's intelligence," he told Ala.

Ala nodded, holding up the fat little girl-baby fondly. "How could they have? Teena is an unusual child."

Rann agreed seriously. "Anyone can see that. Still, it is good that they are males—the more males are born, the sooner we will have power to assert again our sex."

They were all more occupied than before, now. The men had the problem of procuring more food, and Rann devised bows and arrows and spears to conserve their pistol-charges. The women were engrossed in the rearing of the children, exchanging advice and information, running at each lusty infant howl.

THEY made the caverns comfortable, with fittings they took from the interior of the flier and with devices of their own invention. There was a certain zest in the life, Rann found. It was good to swing with Berk Ennel through the morning, dew-wet

woods, with eyes alert for game, good to come back and sit beside the fire and roll the gleefully crowing, chubby babies on their backs while their mothers hurried to prepare the evening meal.

Juss Hull and the other two men who were without mates began to complain. They had at first congratulated themselves on not drawing any of the women, but now they complained that they had no one to prepare their food and that their caverns were not often cleaned. At last they demanded that they be allowed to go back to the cities of the females and steal mates.

"We can do it easily!" Juss Hull insisted to Rann. "We can start in the flier at nightfall and be back before morning—We'll simply swoop down on the city and snatch up three females."

Rann Haddan shook his head. "No, it's too risky! You'll either be captured or followed here and you know what that will mean. The females will destroy the lot of us."

"Some time in the future there will come a chance. Meanwhile, we have to play safe and build up our community to so strong a position that it not only can hold its own but can go back to the cities in force and reassert our sex."

"If you were really intent on restoring our sex to power you'd allow us to go," said Juss Hull.

"Yes, it's all very well for you," said one of the other two sullenly. "You already have mates."

"I say you shan't go!" Rann Haddan repeated. "I'm not going to have what we've already accomplished destroyed now."

That night when he sat down with the others in the main cavern to eat, he saw three faces missing. Instantly his brain sounded alarm.

"Where are Juss Hull and Lan Las and Dirk Or?" he demanded.

Kim Ivan raised his head. "They went out hunting this afternoon just be-

fore you returned. They said they'd be back soon."

Rann jumped to his feet and ran out the cleft and through the woods to where the flier had been hidden. He had a fatal foreknowledge, though, of what he would see, and was not surprised when he found the flier gone.

He went slowly back through the cleft to the caverns, his face set. The others were waiting in surprise.

"They have gone to steal mates despite my forbidding them," he said.

Ala clutched the gurgling Teena in sudden alarm.

"Rann, there is danger?"

He tried to smile. "Perhaps not. They may be able to steal women and get away without being caught."

"Of course," reassured Berk Ennel. "They'll be back before morning, never fear."

All the rest of that night Rann Haddan watched outside the cliff, peering into the eastern sky. The hours passed slowly. He longed to see the flier return as he had never longed for anything in his life, thinking of the others sleeping there in the caverns.

But he saw no longed-for flier whining with white fire-pulmes through the moonlight. Gray dawn came and flushed rose and still it had not come. He waited until the sun was well up in the heavens, then made decision and went quickly back in to the caverns.

"Juss Hull and the others are captured or dead," he said rapidly. "There's no doubt of it—they'd never have stayed till after dawn otherwise."

"The females will wring the secret of this place out of them if they're still alive and will come here to destroy us. We've got to hide for a while."

"Where?" asked Berk Ennel. "The woods?"

"They'll comb the woods with atom-blasts if they come," Rann answered. "That projecting ledge up atop the

cliffs is the best place. We'll be hidden, there, and have a chance to fight."

"We'll take the children and our weapons up there and then food and water. Be quick, now—we mustn't lose a moment."

Pale faced, yet without losing time in talk, men and women began the task of moving to the ledge high up on the cliff. It was a mere long recess under an overhanging shelf of rock, to be reached only by a risky climb up zigzagging narrower ledges.

The women carried the children, the men following with all their available weapons. As he climbed behind Ala, watching her anxiously as she climbed with the fat, sleeping little Teena in her arms, glimpsing her taut, pale face, Rann cursed Juss Hull and his companions from the depths of his heart.

THEY had reached the ledge and the men were starting back down after the food and water when Ala uttered a cry.

She pointed eastward. "Rann, fliers come!"

He stopped, stared east. A little swarm of half-dozen black midges was coming out of the east, growing rapidly bigger.

"They're coming straight here and that means it's us they're looking for," he said.

"No time to get the food and water now. Get back under the shelf there, all of you, where they can't see us so well."

They hurried back into the shadows beneath the looming overhang of the great rock shelf. The women crouched down in the darkness at the extreme back of this space. The child of Berk Ennel awoke and began to cry, and his mate hastily soothed it.

Rann Haddan and Berk Ennel and Kim Ivan and the other two men lay flattened just inside the shadows of the

overhang, watching the fliers approach, their atom-pistols tightly clutched in their hands and their spears and bows beside them.

The six fliers came on in a long downward slant toward the base of the cliff, their atom-streams sounding in a diminuendo scream. They slanted down out of sight and Rann and his companions crawled out to the edge of the ledge and looked down. They saw dozens of white-clad figures pour quickly out of the fliers, and into the cleft in the cliff.

"They caught Juss Hull and the others all right," Rann gritted. "They know just where to look for us."

"Maybe when they don't find us there they'll think we've gone away completely, and won't look further," Berk Ennel said hopefully.

Rann laughed mirthlessly. "Our fires are still smoking in the caverns. They'll look further, never fear."

They saw the white-clad figures emerge from the cleft again in a few moments, look this way and that. Then they entered their fliers.

Rann Haddan and his companions shrank back again into the shadows. They heard the fliers rising.

Then as they crouched they heard the fliers moving along the cliffs, searching every opening in them.

One of the fliers went slowly by, but without their being perceived. Hope rose in Rann. And ironically it was crushed in the next moment as another fier came, suddenly stopped and hovered.

They saw faces peering from it, staring straight at them. Then the fier darted quickly away, and they heard calling cries.

"They've found us," Rann said. He got to his feet. "We'll meet them out on the open ledge."

Ala clung fiercely to him. "You must not! I will go with you if you do!"

He put her hands gently from him,

pushed her back to the child. His heart seemed stone as he turned away.

He went out and stood on the ledge with Berk Ennel and the others, his pistol raised, his pulse thudding. He heard a strangled cry from Ala and sobs from the other women but did not turn.

With roaring thunder of their atom-streams, up sprang all six fliers, hovered at the edge of the ledge, came to rest on it. Their doors opened, and as figures poured out Rann Haddan aimed at the first.

His finger hesitated at the very moment it was about to pull the trigger. That first figure he saw over his sights was a familiar figure and surprise stayed him.

"Juss Hull!" he cried. Juss Hull and the other two men were running toward them and behind came a group of armed females.

"Don't fire, Rann!" cried Juss Hull. "It's all right—they're friends!"

Bewildered, Rann and his friends let Juss Hull's trio and the females approach. Juss Hull was bursting with explanations.

"They came back with us, Rann! We couldn't find you in the caves but knew you'd be somewhere near."

"You see, when we went back to the city we found that things had changed. There's civil war between the females, a revolt of all the western cities against the Ruling Council's strict rule!"

"The females there are no longer hunting us, and they want us to come back. And they say that if we come back, they'll agree to have the birth-laboratories produce more males!"

RANN HADDAN turned in incredulous amazement to the female leader. "Is that true?"

"It is," she said instantly. "We need fighters now and you men are that—you proved it when you made your escape."

"You're no longer under sentence and if you come back and help us we'll agree that as many males shall be produced in future as females."

Rann Haddon stared at her, unable to speak. It was his dream come true, not after the slow lapse of many years, but here and now. Once again the males should rise as a sex, once again his sex should share the world with the other.

All that he had fought and schemed and toiled for here—it had fallen into his hands now, like this. He saw the cities of the future, more and more males produced in them, his sex again co-equal with the other.

Something clutched his sleeve and he turned. It was the child Teena, held by Ala, who had come out to his side.

It brought a sudden new thought into his mind and he turned again to the female leader.

"But what about our children and wives—what about Teena and Ala?"

The leader glanced indifferently at the child. "The children will be placed in the State Nurseries, of course. No one will ever know but what they're laboratory children."

"Your wives can re-enter the service. We'll be willing to overlook this atavistic sexual association that has been going on between you and them."

Ala clutched the baby tight, her eyes flaming wrath. "Teena in a State Nursery? But you can't put her there—not her!"

"No, of course not," said Rann Haddon bewilderedly. "And Ala and I can't be separated."

"You mean that you two want to *continue* this association of yours?" the female leader asked in incredulous disgust.

Rann's arm went around Ala. "Of course we do! Do you think we're going to be separated now?"

The leader glanced from him to the

others. "You all feel this way? But in that case you can't return."

"In that case we don't want to return!" Rann shouted. And suddenly without reason at all he felt joyful, confident. "We want to stay right here."

Old Kim Ivan was aghast. "Rann, do you realize what you're doing? Turning down the thing you've worked for for months, the chance to go back and reassert the male sex?"

"Why, I never heard of such a thing!"

"You never had a family, either," Rann told him.

The female leader shook her head hopelessly. "You're all mad. Stay here in your savagery, then."

She turned, and her female followers moved with her toward the fliers. All but three who hesitated beside Juss Hull and his two companions.

"Well, why are you lingering?" snapped the leader to her three hang-back followers.

They looked down, ashamed. "We want to stay here too," said one. "We've been talking to these three males and they want us to stay."

The leader's jaw dropped. "Is this repulsive atavism contagious? It must

be—we'd better get out of here before all of us catch it."

"Into your fliers, the rest of you! We return!"

In the main cavern that night Rann Haddan sat by the fire with Teena sleeping in his lap, and Ala drowsing at his side. Across the cavern the others were laughing and chatting in a group. Now and then their bursts of merriment came to him as he sat.

He dreamed over the fire, looking into its embers of crimson and rose. Ala's head dropped lower and lower against him until suddenly she awoke with a jerk, and then looked at him and rubbed her eyes.

She put out her hand to his. "You are not sorry that we stayed, that we did not return to the cities?"

He laughed. "We'll return sometime. Maybe not you and I, maybe not even Teena, but her children or her children's children."

"Let the females fight their wars between themselves and exhaust themselves. Our two-sexed little world here will grow and grow until it rules the whole earth again!"

The End.



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THE TEST-TUBE MONSTER

BY GEORGE E. CLARK

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Ultra-science had created this beautiful test-tube girl Graeme Mansfield loved, and ultra-science would wed her to the test-tube monster who chose her as his mate!



Mansfield tried to break his fall by twisting in mid-air

CHAPTER I

BIRTH OF A SUPER-MAN

GRAEME MANSFIELD pressed a slight shudder as he pushed the button beside the shining door of the scientist's laboratory. The wild, eager expression on Professor Thorndile's face, as it had appeared in the television mirror, and the uncontrolled squeak of his excited voice had prepared him for a distasteful half hour.

Mansfield was an artist; scientific matters bored him. He cheerfully admitted that he, like all humanity, prof-

ited every moment of his life from the discoveries of such men as this old professor. Yet even the projected flight to Mars, which after years of planning was scheduled to begin today, had failed to lure him from his glassite-domed studio, where he worked passionately over his own problem of the fourth-dimensional element in his latest painting, that of a superb golden goddess.

But old Thorndile had summoned him, pleadingly, and here he was.

They had nothing in common; in fact, he had found the scientist a rather irritating person. Nevertheless, despite his artistic sensitiveness, he was

tolerant of human shortcomings. If he disliked Thorndile, if there was something queer, something slightly sinister in the professor's personality, Mansfield was ready to excuse it on the grounds of scientific preoccupation.

He pressed the button again. A blue light flared in his face from the mirror-like surface of the chromium steel door that guarded the scientist's sanctum. He was, he knew, visible to Professor Thorndile in his radionic-vision reflector, even though his own eyes could not pierce the steel partition. He frowned; it seemed strange that a man who took such precautions against unwelcome visitors should wish to see him.

The heavy door rolled back silently into the wall. Mansfield blinked his eyes. The laboratory appeared to be dark; but as he stepped forward he made out numerous reddish glows—ruby lights.

"Ha, you have come, my friend! Splendid, splendid!"

Professor Thorndile touched a button and some electrically controlled mechanism rolled the huge door shut behind Mansfield. Again he felt like shuddering.

He glanced around. The place had the atmosphere of a hell, to his sensitive imagination; he didn't enjoy the feeling of being locked in here. Everything had a reddish hue—the scientist's bald, egg-shaped head and lean face, with its sunken cheeks and eyes that peered at him through thick-lensed spectacles; his shriveled old body; the walls and ceiling; the complex maze of benches, scales, test tubes and other paraphernalia—all tended to create a weird illusion, diabolically unreal.

"What is it you wish to tell me, Professor?" he asked, shaking the scientist's bony hand with attempted cordiality.

"Tell you! My friend, I got you here to *show* you, not tell you! I am

about to reveal—for the first time to anyone but myself—the greatest miracle of scientific achievement since the year 1968! Do you know what outstanding discovery marked that year, Mansfield?"

"No," the young man confessed, "I'm afraid not. As you know, I'm an artist, not a scientist. I could tell you a number of advances that have been made in the field of art. For instance, in the ten years since 1968 the fourth-dimensional element, which I am now working on, was introduced into the works of Van Devere and Molct to a degree that makes our old conceptions—"

Professor Thorndile checked him.

"Art!" he scoffed. "I know nothing of art—care nothing for it! I, Mansfield, am a scientist, the greatest scientific mind since Alterberg, the physicist, who gave the world his theory of eternitity. I am even greater than Alterberg—as you shall be privileged to see for yourself!"

MANSFIELD avoided meeting the piercing gaze of those fanatical old eyes. As an artist, he had learned to be tolerant of the flaming ego-superiority of creative men. It was necessary, he supposed, for a man to have an exaggerated feeling of his own importance, at least privately, in order to put down all obstacles and accomplish the seemingly impossible. Even in this day of wonders, one who attempted radically new things had to contend with the incredulity of others. It was a race-instinct, apparently, to doubt whatever the imagination could not readily grasp. Yet Professor Thorndile's cackling voice and over-confident manner made him stir uncomfortably.

"Why have you chosen me, a layman, to be the first one to see this thing, whatever it is?" he asked, a trifle ir-

ritably.

"Ha, we will come to that later, my young friend! To understand, you must first view the miracle to which I am about to introduce you. Mansfield, my boy, the efforts of my hands and brain, of twenty-seven years of exhaustive study and toil, are today in the final stage of fulfilment! But, come—follow me!"

He led the way to a tall object which loomed up like a shrouded pillar in the semi-darkness. Then he jerked a cord, and the shroud arose, revealing what seemed to be a giant test tube.

"Look!" hissed the professor. "What do you see?"

Mansfield pressed forward, straining his eyes. Dimly he could make out a network of wires, tubes, valves; a complication of tanks and wheels and agitators; and attached to the outside of the great test tube were numerous dials, regulators, indicators and moving graphs. He shook his head apologetically.

"What is it, Professor?" he asked politely, not wanting to appear rude by revealing his lack of interest.

The old man did not answer at once. He touched a switch, and soft rays of indirect light flooded the laboratory.

"Look again!" he urged.

Mansfield's indifferent gaze fell on the interior of the great glassite tube. He recoiled, gasping.

"Great Caesar—a *man!*"

Professor Thorndile chuckled. "Yes, my friend, you are right! That fellow *is* a man, as much as yourself, but with a great difference. You, Mansfield, were born of a woman, in the normal, orthodox fashion. This fellow—" He waved a hand to indicate his laboratory, then straightened his dwarfish body proudly. "This fellow," he said, "is the product of my brain!"

Mansfield drew a deep breath, still staring. The creature was half floating

in some kind of liquid. Mansfield dimly recalled having read somewhere that the mother's body provides her offspring only protection, water, food, oxygen; the embryo developing its own blood and tissue. This liquid, then, must be a blood-substitute containing oxygen and bacteria-destroying properties; the tube attached to the creature's navel supplied food. The rest—the flexible wires joined by suction caps to certain muscles, the tubes running to nose and mouth and ears, Mansfield did not understand. What amazed him most was the size of the supposed infant; he was at least eight feet in height!

"Robot?" Mansfield asked hoarsely.

"Robot!" the scientist mocked scornfully. His voice sent a little chill down Mansfield's spine. "Would a robot have flesh and blood? Would it kick—would its heart beat? You, my young friend, are seeing a full-grown specimen of *homo sapiens*, scientifically developed!"

The artist's face showed his perplexed incredulity.

"Surely," cried the scientist, "you can see for yourself! Even a layman today knows that science has long been experimenting with the test tube baby! You must be aware, Mansfield, that to bring to birth rabbits and cats and dogs and cattle—even monkeys—outside the mother's body has become commonplace in the last decade! Only the human being, the most complicated of all vertebrates, has continued to defy that inevitable accomplishment!"

MANSFIELD roused himself out of his amazed stupor.

"The test tube baby!" he muttered, catching at the familiar phrase to steady himself. "Yes, certainly. They've been talking about that for half a century. I've read how Colonel Lindbergh, away back in 1936, gave up aviation and began to experiment with

the possibilities of developing an infant in a test tube. Yes, and everyone knows that Dr. Leicester recently succeeded in bringing the Morrell sextuplets into the world after seven months in an incubator of some sort. But this—" He wiped his brow. "This, Professor, is not a—*baby!*"

"Of course he's not a baby! He has the physical development of a thirty-year-old adult. See those radionic vibrators? They have produced in three years muscles that no human ever possessed before! And his brain! He has the intellect of a man of fifty, yet his mind has the plasticity, the teachability, of a young child! He will be known as the wonder of the age—of all time! Mansfield, you are looking at the long-awaited super-man of this planet!"

Mansfield gasped.

"Did I not tell you that I am greater than even Alterberg?" cackled the scientist. "What do you think now, heh?"

"I—I can scarcely credit my own eyes with the truth!" whispered Mansfield. "I've learned to believe anything is possible to man's ingenuity, and yet—"

"And yet your eyes do not lie!" the old man chortled. "When you learn the potentialities of my super-man, you will be still more amazed, my young friend. Do you know how old that fellow is? Four years old! I developed him from a mass of protoplasm to his present perfection in four years and eighteen days. Do you believe me?"

Mansfield tore his gaze from the quietly pulsating figure to look at the scientist. He felt a little faint, his brain reeled, his mind was staggered at what he was witnessing.

"Tell me," he demanded hoarsely, "how you did it! Is he—is he human?"

"Yes and no!" chuckled the old man, delighted at his guest's stupefaction. "He is a controlled variation, just as the

race of mankind is a nature-evolved variation from the ancient *Pithenanthropus erectus*, the once so-called missing link from the ape man to *homo sapiens*. If you were a scientist, Mansfield, I could readily make you understand a great deal. Do you know anything about embryology, histology, anatomy, morphology, physiology or psychology?"

Mansfield shook his head regretfully.

"Right now I wish I did," he said. "Of course my artistic training included elementary anatomy and physiology, and nowadays every layman knows a little psychology. But maybe I can grasp a little of what you say. How on earth did you—"

"I will explain, then, such scientific details as you can understand, but not yet. First, my friend, let us examine another wonder which my brain has created. To you, an artist, this one will be of extreme interest, no doubt, because—"

He checked himself, obviously unwilling to reveal his secret beforehand. They passed into another part of the laboratory, where Mansfield beheld another curtained test tube. Thorndile raised the shroud.

"Darkness has been essential to embryonic development," he remarked, "but now it does not matter. In a short time—" He glanced at his watch. "In exactly fourteen minutes they will be ready to be born."

"They." Mansfield gaped at the test tube. "Is this another?"

The professor moved a switch and again hidden lights flooded upon them. Mansfield caught his breath sharply, staring.

"A—a woman!" he cried. "A beautiful maiden! Why, great Caesar." His stare widened, incredulously. "It's—it's the golden goddess!"

CHAPTER II

THE SECOND MIRACLE

GRAEME MANSFIELD knew that he was looking at the most beautiful female his eyes had ever beheld. Her mass of golden hair bore a striking resemblance to the hair he had tried to produce on his canvas; but a second glance disclosed that his conception had been far short of the matchless vision he was now staring at.

She was a young girl, apparently about eighteen or nineteen, according to normal standards. Mansfield in all his life had never seen such glorious physical perfection in any creature. The most ideal models who had ever posed for him were crude and ill-shaped in comparison with this maiden. From the top of her golden head to the bottom of her shapely pink toes, which no shoe had ever marred, she was the acme of perfect womanhood.

Yet Mansfield realized sickeningly that she must be abnormal, like the giant super-man he had just seen. She had the same tubes at navel, nostrils, mouth and ears, though the muscle developers were missing from her shapely figure.

"She's not—not human—not normal, I mean, is she?" he asked, feeling a sudden unreasoning hatred of the professor.

"Yes, she is," Thorndile said. "I have not experimented with her beyond the most elementary matters of embryonic culture. She is a fully developed girl, Mansfield, the equivalent of a twenty-year-old woman, but her great beauty makes her look younger. To me, she is of secondary importance. I have not cared to over-develop her, as she will serve my purpose in her normal state, with all its normal functions."

"Your purpose?" echoed Mansfield. "What purpose?"

"I was referring to the part she will play in life, as the wife of my super-man. The union of a super-male with a highly gifted normal female is sure to result in—"

Mansfield caught his bony arm.

"You're not going to do that!" he cried. "This girl—that monster! You're going to mate them—like cattle?"

The scientist stared at him, surprised.

"What is wrong with that?" he squeaked. "That has been my great dream—my lifelong ambition, which the world has laughed at! You, Mansfield, have never laughed at me. I like you. You alone, even though you are not a scientist, have been tolerant, understanding. That is why I have brought you here, why I have shown you the astounding secret which I have hidden from the world. Mansfield, I am going to create a new race of beings—a super-race of mankind! Mansfield, the race of normal humans is doomed—the world is doomed—the world which has laughed at me and scorned me as a fool! You, Mansfield, shall not be destroyed. I have brought you here to show you, to instruct you. I am sparing your life, Mansfield!"

The artist stared at the grotesque face before him. The man was mad, he felt sure, now. His eyes blazed with hate, his wizened features were distorted with a lust for revenge. He seemed more inhuman than the giant he had brought to life in the test tube. Mansfield felt his flesh crawling with horror; but apparently the scientist did not observe his reaction.

"The World is ruled by dictators," Thorndile went on passionately. "Lucini, the master of United Europe—Sin Tao, the master-mind of the Oriental League—Channing, the President of

Federated North and South Americas. Super-men, the silly masses call *them*. Super-men, Mansfield! Ha, I'll show them! They shall all be destroyed. There will be one world dictator, one super-man. You have seen him. In a few moments you will talk with him. He will rule all beings on this planet, my friend, and from his loins will spring a new race, a super-race which shall hold such humans as are permitted to live in subjection, as slaves!"

With an effort, Mansfield got a grip on himself. He decided to humor the old professor. The thing he was talking about was absurd. Destroy the nations of the earth, except for a handful of slaves; create a new race! Why, the idea was preposterous—lunacy!

AND yet—He glanced back at the test tube containing the lovely young woman. Thorndile had done this. Using his great knowledge of the very latest developments in many branches of ultra-modern science, he had accomplished a seeming miracle. If he could do the thing which other scientists had deemed impossible—if he had created a new scientific Adam and Eve—why not the rest?

"How, Professor, will you proceed to set up this super-man as world dictator?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound natural. "What of the armies, the forces on land and sea and in the air? It seems to me an impossible undertaking!"

The scientist tapped Mansfield's chest with a bony finger.

"You are talking nonsense!" he scoffed. "Armies, navies, airplanes! Of what use will they be against my super-man? Bullets will not harm him; poison gas will not kill him, any more than it can kill certain bacteria with which he is inoculated. The fellow is invulnerable, and I estimate his lifespan at two hundred years!"

"Two hundred years!"

"Certainly! Now, listen to me, Mansfield. You have observed grasshoppers, have you not?"

"Grasshoppers? Certainly!"

"You have seen them leap great distances. A man who could catapult himself a corresponding distance for his size would be killed by the fall, would he not? Furthermore, a normal man would jerk his own legs off if he could spring from the ground with enough force to equal the grasshopper's feat, for his size. Or think of an enormous house fly, the size of a man. Think what a monster he would be, Mansfield—his strength, his relative invulnerability! Think of any insect, the ant, for instance. How does it compare with man, considering the differences in size between them?"

Mansfield wore a puzzled frown.

"What are you getting at, Thorndile?" he asked.

"Just this! Years ago I discovered how the flesh and blood and bones of a human infant could be treated in the embryonic stages as to develop the best characteristics of insect life, yet leaving the brain all its highest functions of thought, will power and imagination. In fact, in the case of my super-man, I have been able, by the means of gland secretions, to give him a gigantic brain and a mind that transcends even my own ability to realize its powers!"

"Mansfield shook his head slowly.

"All this sounds incredible," he said, "yet I am forced to believe you know what you are talking about. If I hadn't seen with my own eyes—" He paused, glancing at the sleeping beauty. "What of her?" he asked, with a slight choke in his voice. She seemed so sweetly innocent that it pained the young artist to regard her as being in any way connected with all this scientific madness. "Is she, too, invulnerable to ordinary death-dealing instruments?"

Thorndile jerked his egg-like head decisively. "No," he sneered, "I have little interest in her, Mansfield. As soon as she has served my purpose she will be destroyed."

"Destroyed!" Mansfield drew back.

The scientist crackled with amusement. "Ha, your artistic sense is shocked at the idea of destroying such beauty!" he laughed. "But it will be quite necessary to kill her, Mansfield. You see, my super-man must not be allowed to form any silly affection for her. It would seriously interfere with the future which I have so carefully mapped out for him. No, she is only a woman. I need her only that a new creature may be created, in my test tube. It will be, in a way, her child; but it will be a super-human, like its father. I shall make it a woman. As you know, science has discovered the origin of sex, though I am the first scientist to achieve a method of positive control. You see, the oocytes from which ova develop, and the spermatogonia which becomes sperms—"

A tremendous crash drowned out his shrill voice. Mansfield jumped. He heard the sound of falling glass, then an inhuman roar.

"What was that?" he cried.

The scientist's gaunt face had turned ashen; his eyes bulged.

"The glassite—the test tube!" he shrieked. "He has broken out through a wall of solid glassite! Quick, Mansfield—the super-man has been born!"

CHAPTER III

THE MONSTER TAKES CHARGE

MANSFIELD, his legs stiff with horror, followed the running professor. Arriving at the smashed test tube he halted, staring in mingled artist admiration and human

dread and antipathy at the towering, dripping giant that confronted the scientist and himself.

The naked super-man was even taller than he had appeared to be while in the test tube. Wet black hair clung to his huge head, but he was beardless and his elephantine torso was smooth and hairless. A silver valve at his navel took the place of a button. His muscles, still bearing the imprint of suction cups, rippled beneath thick ivory skin, as he took a step toward them.

Instinctively, Mansfield drew back. He was not by nature a timid person, yet the sight of this giant chilled his spine. But Thorndile, far from being afraid, appeared delighted with the spawn of his weird brain. Without further hesitation, he approached his offspring in an affectionate manner, and they stood together, the wizened old scientist and the super-man, like pigmy and elephantine Goliath, regarding each other.

"Ha, you decided to come out!" said the scientist. "You should have waited. You have ruined a very expensive apparatus. I should not have forgotten. In my conversation with Mansfield, the time for your birth slipped by unnoticed. But you should have waited—you might have injured your knuckles on the glassite!"

The super-man writhed his face into a terrible scowl that seemed to frighten even the professor.

"I wait for no man!" he boomed, in a voice like thunder.

"But I am your master," squeaked the scientist. "I created you. You must obey me!"

The giant stretched out one long arm and caught Thorndile by his skinny neck. With the ease with which a cat tosses a helpless mouse into the air, he lifted the professor above his head. The old man's shriek was cut off by the big thumb on his throat; his legs kicked

and dangled, and he tried weakly to tear the giant hand from his neck. Suddenly the super-man opened his hand, and the scientist dropped some ten feet to the floor.

"You, my master—*you!*!" the super-man sneered. Then he threw back his head and laughed so loud that Mansfield was almost deafened. The scientist recovered himself enough to get to his feet, where he stood swaying. Mansfield supported him.

"There is nothing you can teach me," asserted the giant proudly. "I have been in communication with your brain for over two years. How do I know how to speak? I have learned it telepathically. You are only a mortal—I am a super-man. Of what possible use can you be to me? Your mental processes are childish in comparison with mine. I know the plans you have made for me. Your mind has taught me everything; you do not need to tell me. I have *felt* the impressions of your thoughts, of your emotions. Tell me, you weakling, what good *can* you do me?"

"I—I—" quavered the professor, and stopped. He couldn't think a thing to suggest! "But you can't kill *me!*" he protested. "Common decency—a man's loyalty to his creator, his own father—"

"Are you trying to insult me?" thundered the monster, advancing threateningly.

Mansfield turned to flee, and the professor did likewise; but the super-man seemed only to find amusement in their terror.

"Mice!" he sneered, then chuckled. "I'm going to have a lot of fun with you while I let you live. I have one thing which you never gave me, Thorndile—a sense of humor. That's a human trait I must have inherited from my human ancestors. But your talk of loyalty is nonsense, Thorndile! You have instilled

only hate and malice in my impressionable mind; it's too late to change now. I'm what I am. You made me this way—it's only right for you to reap your reward."

The scientist was speechless; he seemed paralyzed with fear.

"I am reading your minds right now," the super-man asserted, his face expanding in a wolfish grin. "You, Thorndile, are trying feverishly to think of some way to control my actions—it has even flashed into your contemptible mind to try to destroy me. But—" He chuckled with satisfaction. "But you can't think of anything that could kill me!" he laughed.

"And you, Mansfield, are wondering about that girl—what I'm going to do with her. Well, you'll soon find out. Thorndile, I have absorbed most of your psychology, but there's one point on which I do not agree with you. I want that girl, Thorndile, and I'm going to have her. And that reminds me, I'd better take a look at her; I've only received the false impressions of your warped, woman-hating brain to tell me what she's like!"

HE advanced with great strides, and the two men flung themselves desperately out of his path. He ignored them and went straight to the test tube containing the sleeping golden-haired maiden.

Mansfield picked himself up from the floor and stared after the naked giant. Anger surged up in him, displacing fear and caution.

"He's not going to touch her!" he gritted. "That girl is—human! He's a monster, Thorndile—an inhuman monster, Thorndile—an inhuman monster! *I'm going to kill him!*



CHAPTER IV

DEATH OF THE MAD SCIENTIST

SEIZING a stout surgeon's scalpel of dura-steel, Mansfield crept along the floor toward the newborn monster.

"Come back!" hissed the professor. "You can't harm him—he will kill you!"

But Mansfield went on, unheeding. He saw the super-man bending his huge back and peering in at the slumbering girl; and he knew only one thought—he must annihilate the inhuman freak!

Apparently the monster's clairvoyant perceptions were momentarily suspended by his conscious mind. He was deeply engrossed in his study of the unborn beauty, and Mansfield crept up within seven or eight feet of him without attracting his attention. Mansfield realized then that despite his super-human powers of mind the giant could scarcely receive impressions from all persons in the world at once; the result would be confusion and perplexity, chaos. There were limitations to the fellow's perceptive powers, then; and that discovery gave Mansfield encouragement.

Slowly, cautiously, he rose to his feet, raised the knife to strike. The giant did not move. Mansfield brought the blade down with all the strength of his right arm.

The monster grunted, whirled around. Mansfield's arm was numb. The knife lay on the floor. The impact with the super-man's flesh had produced only a slight dent, as if his skin were the hide of a rhinoceros!

For one awful moment Mansfield had the feeling that he was facing certain death. The giant's black eyes blazed with fury; then, surprisingly, his gaze took in the scalpel on the floor, and he

threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"You—you puny ant!" he bellowed. "You—tried to kill *me*!"

The creature's perverted sense of humor kept him laughing for a full minute, big drops of tears rolling down his great cheeks. Finally he ceased, and the thunderous echoes died away.

"But," he said, wiping his eyes with a huge forefinger, "even ants have courage. I like your courage, Mansfield. I shall show you a special favor."

Mansfield held his breath; he could not speak.

"I'll let you choose your own manner of dying," said the giant. He turned back to his inspection of the girl, quite as if he had not been interrupted.

Finally he grunted, and began to fumble at an air-tight door of the test tube; a moment later he flung it open. Mansfield watched him remove the mechanical connections from the girl's body, then pick her up in his huge arms, as if she were a tiny infant. Holding her by the ankles in one hand, he administered a sound slap, as a physician spanks a newly born babe to clear its lung passage and close the placental circulation artery.

The girl screamed—the cry of a woman, not an infant. Mansfield clenched his fists in helpless rage. Yet the giant seemed to know what he was about. He turned her right side up and set her on her feet. She swayed weakly, then got her balance. Her lovely blue eyes were wide with wonder. She looked all around, bewildered.

"Ha," said the super-man, imitating the expression used by the scientist, from whose consciousness he had learned his speech, "you are not so bad. Thorndile gave me a wrong impression of you. Too bad you are not a super-woman. But my mentality is not limited to that runt's conceptions; I shall devise a way to improve you, make you

a giant like me. Already I have a theory."

She stared at him, wide-eyed, timorous, apprehensive.

MANSFIELD was so ravished by her appealing beauty that he almost forgot his dread of the monster.

"You lovely, lovely creature!" he breathed. "You *are* my golden goddess—only far more perfect than my conception of you! How did it happen? Why is there such a resemblance in you to my imaginative painting?"

She turned and regarded him silently. The look in her blue eyes melted his heart. Suddenly he cried out.

"I have it! I understand now! You are—"

The monster interrupted him.

"You are right," he rumbled. "Your inferior mind has hit upon the truth. Thorndile visited you at your studio while your mind was intensely active with your inspiration of a super-woman, a goddess. He carried away an unconscious impression of maidenly perfection which has been conveyed to the sub-conscious mind of this girl, influencing her development. You, not Thorndile, are the author of her pulchritude. Mansfield, I find it possible to be grateful to you. I shall let you live for an indefinite period. I shall put you temporarily to work as my slave."

The maiden spoke for the first time in her life, falteringly.

"Mansfield—Mansfield," she repeated slowly, in a soft, musical voice. "Graeme—*Graeme* Mansfield?"

"Yes," whispered the artist. "You can speak! And—and you know me already?"

"It—it seems to be in my mind—that name," she said. "I can hear the name—it is associated with beauty—lovely things!"

The super-man frowned horribly at

her, then he withered Mansfield with a glance of jealous rage.

"When I have performed an operation on certain of your glands," he informed the girl, "you will not waste your thoughts on trivial ideas of art. You will be coldly intellectual, as I am, except for my sense of humor. While I appreciated your beauty, it is your mental possibilities and the attraction of the opposite sex that really matter to me. I will raise you above the normal limitations of ordinary mortals; you shall grow to be a giant, physically and mentally, for I need a super-woman companion."

Mansfield shuddered. He tried to repress a thought; saw the monster turn upon him, grinning horribly.

"You are thinking of killing me—again!" he growled. The words were followed by another burst of roaring laughter. He broke off suddenly, gave a tremendous leap that carried him clear across the long laboratory.

Mansfield spun around, just in time to see him land beside the professor, who had opened the door and was trying to escape outside. The monster clutched him by the scruff of the neck and carried him back, arriving beside the wide-eyed girl and her amazed companion in two bounds.

"Now I will have some fun," chuckled the giant.

He tossed the trembling scientist on the floor, where the old man cringed, whining piteously.

"Thorndile," rumbled the super-man, "I am going to kill you with your own device. As I told you, I am familiar with all your plans. Your cosmo-wave is designed to end the life of every human being responding to a certain vibration. You intended to raise your own physical vibration, and Mansfield's, to protect yourself, leaving the majority of humanity to die instantly from this ether-wave. Your idea is a

good one. I shall employ the high-frequency vibrator to protect my mate and also Mansfield, for the time being. I shall not need that protection, having the vibration of certain bacteria. But you, Thorndile, shall perish by your own invention!"

"No, no!" quavered the scientist. "Let me live—you need me—to assist you! There are many things which you still need to learn, consciously. You have inherited only instincts, like a chick that comes from the shell and instinctively crouches in the grass at the shadow of a hawk!"

"You compare me with a low form of life, a chick!" sneered the monster. "Have I not demonstrated super-intelligence, super-physical prowess? A baby chick is not invulnerable. *I am!*"

Pride was in his rumbling, arrogant voice—the pride and self-esteem of his creator, Thorndile. The giant bent down and picked up the surgeon's scalpel, snapped the dura-steel between his thumb and fore-finger, opened his huge mouth and swallowed the broken instrument with a single gulp!

"If you would wait for me to die," he grinned at Mansfield, "I should have to prolong your life to equal my own span—two hundred years!"

HAVING delivered this proud statement, he seemed to mellow a trifle with self-satisfaction. A look akin to condescension and scornful pity came over his face. He stooped and picked up the scientist, who squealed in terror.

"Shut up!" growled the test tube monster. "I've decided not to torture you. I'll subject you to a painless death at once." Before either of them could move out of his reach, he swooped up Mansfield and the dripping-wet maiden in his other arm and walked in three-yard strides to a far corner of the laboratory.

"It will soon be over," he comforted

the scientist. "You said I should have a son's reverence toward you. I am therefore making this compromise. Thorndile, you may pull the lever that will bring about your own end!"

He set his victims down in front of a glass-metal machine. The old man's eyes were popping out in terror as he was forced to look at his own diabolical invention.

Mansfield felt sick with horror. In his imagination he could see millions upon millions of men, women and children sinking lifeless to the streets and the floors of their homes. He felt himself on the verge of insanity.

"No, no! *Thorndile!* You can't do this—it's fiendish, ghastly! You can't Thorndile, you *can't!*"

Beside him the maiden stood looking from one to the other in innocent wonder.

"I don't—don't understand," she complained, touching Mansfield's arm with an instinctive feminine appeal for masculine protection. "Will people—like us—stop living?"

Mansfield's arm went around her. He nodded silently.

"Will we—will you, Graeme, and I stop living?" she pursued.

"Some day, if not now," he told her hoarsely. "But this—this is *murder!*"

The super-man threw him a scornful glance. "What sentimental nonsense!" he scoffed. "Here—you two—in here!"

He caught them up and shoved them inside a glassite cabinet. Mansfield tried to struggle, but it was like a kitten pitting its strength against an elephant. Before the giant locked them in, however, he had time to hear the professor shrieking at him.

"Mansfield! He is not invulnerable! There is one weakness—all animal life is sustained by—"

The door slammed shut, cutting off the professor's frantic voice. With the girl clinging to him in instinctive fear,

he stared through the glassite at the scene before them.

Enraged at the scientist's statement, evidently divining his thoughts, the monster jerked away from the door, which he had paused to lock. He reached the old man in a single bound, but not in time to prevent the downward blow of the fire-axe in the scientist's desperate grasp.

No sound penetrated the cabinet, but Mansfield saw a pane of ordinary glass break, saw the axe cut into the heart of the delicate mechanism of the cosmo-wave machine.

The giant caught up the mad scientist and promptly tore his head from his shoulders. Mansfield turned away, feeling that he was about to swoon. With a violent effort of will, he kept his senses. He looked down at the girl, whose head was against his chest, thrustingly. He was thankful she had not seen the thing he had just witnessed. She was so young, so devoid of earthly understanding! He shuddered at the thought of what the test tube monster intended to do to her—transform her into a female monster like himself!

"Darling," he whispered. "I love you, and I'll save you—somehow!"

She looked up into his eyes.

"Love!" she repeated softly. "I seem to know that beautiful word. It is connected with you in my mind. Do I love you, Graeme?"

HIS lips pressed hers, and her startled eyes looked into his with a new emotion shining in them.

"I feel—toward you, Graeme—something! Is it—love?"

"Yes, darling!" he whispered. "Nothing shall ever part us now! Wait—this machine!"

He began to examine the complicated mechanism in the corner of the cabinet, wishing desperately that he had more

scientific knowledge.

"This changes the vibrations of protoplasm," he muttered. "If it is adjustable, it could lower the vibrations of even ordinarily indestructible bacteria to the frequency of human vibrations. But to destroy him, I'd have to be able to repair the cosmo-wave generating machine, and—"

Suddenly he realized that he must not transmit his thoughts to the mind of his captor; so he began to think, over and over: "I do *not* know how to kill him—I do *not* know how to kill him!" Yet in his sub-consciousness a half-formed idea had impressed itself.

At that moment the door opened and a mighty hand dragged him out.

"You are trying to conceal your treacherous thoughts from me, you miserable man-animal!" snarled the monster. "Now I am going to kill you—just as you saw me kill Thorndile!"

Mansfield was hoisted above the giant's head so quickly that his senses reeled. Obviously, he was being poised preparatory to being dashed into lifeless pulp against the opposite wall.

A faint cry came from the girl. The monster lowered his victim a trifle to turn and look at her. She was lying insensible in the doorway. He carelessly dropped the artist and hastened to pick up the maid.

Mansfield tried to break his fall by twisting in mid-air and throwing out his arms, but he only partially succeeded. His head came into violent contact with the hard floor. . . .

CHAPTER V

THE MONSTER EMPLOYS HYPNOTISM

MANSFIELD gained consciousness to find himself clasped in the arms of the woman he loved. Disregarding his throbbing

head, he struggled into an upright sitting posture; she was too inexperienced to restrain him.

"Graeme," she whispered tenderly. "You are—you live?"

He groaned, which brought to her beautiful face an expression of pity and slight perplexity.

"What happened?" he asked, looking around. He had been reclining in an arm chair in the late Professor Thorndile's library, the girl kneeling beside him and embracing him. "I was afraid," he muttered, "that something had happened to you—that vibration instrument, or something—"

"I was faint with hunger," she said soberly. "The man giant sent for food, which men brought. The men ran away, frightened. We both ate, and now I am well."

Mansfield jumped to his feet, swaying as the blood left his head; then his faintness passed away and he went to the single door of the library. It was unlocked.

"Where's that monster?" he asked the girl.

"He is repairing the killing machine," she said. "He said he is soon to make himself world dictator. I do not understand, even yet, Graeme."

Mansfield turned toward the windows without replying.

"We've got to get out of here," he whispered hurriedly. "We can't leave by the door, for then we'd have to go through the laboratory, where he would catch us. Come, sweet—we'll climb down from this window and escape! Here, wear this!"

He snatched up a robe from the arm chair and draped it hastily over her shoulders. "Some people are still opposed to nudism," he explained. "We'll get you some clothes; I'm an anti-nudist myself, except for art purposes. My, how beautiful you are—Daphne!"

"Daphne?" she echoed.

"Yes, I'm going to call you Daphne. Tell you the story some day, about the lovely nymph Daphne. But come—we must hurry!"

Opening the window nearest him, he caught her up and was just helping her over the sill when he heard a step outside the door. He leaped toward the door, locked it, then dashed back to the window.

There was a fearful crash, and the door was torn from its hinges. The super-man, ducking his head to pass through the doorway, reached the pair in a flying bound, caught one in either hand, and jerked them back into the room.

"So you thought you could escape!" he growled.

The monster was fully clothed, in a well-cut suit that did justice to his marvelous physique. Despite his disappointment, Mansfield felt an artist's appreciation of his splendid figure.

The giant, seeming to read his thoughts, looked down at himself and smiled with self-satisfaction. Evidently his pleasure at his victim's admiration had temporarily allayed his wrath.

"You are wondering," he rumbled, "how I procured these garments. I will satisfy your curiosity, Mansfield. Thorndile had these clothes made for me some weeks ago. He was not considerate enough of his other experiment to provide her with attire. That is because he intended to destroy her presently."

Mansfield started to open his mouth to speak.

"Now you are wishing to ask why I have spared your life, what I intend to do with you. The first part of that question I will answer. You will be of momentary use to me, Mansfield. My size alarms people, so I am going to send you out with the girl you have presumed to call Daphne to purchase suitable clothing for her."

Here he burst into uproarious laughter.

"You think you see a way to escape me!" he said, when he had controlled his humor enough to speak. "Mansfield, is there no limit to human folly? You should know that what you are thinking is silly. Come here, Mansfield!"

The artist recoiled from his super-human master in revulsion. The monster's black eyes were fastened on his in a penetrating gaze; he felt his mind going blank, as if he were going under a spell. *Hypnotism!* The word flashed upon his weakening consciousness.

"Graeme! Graeme!" called the girl. Her voice sounded faint, distant, fearful. "Don't sleep, Graeme! I need you, Graeme!"

TEARING his gaze from the monster's terrible eyes, Mansfield sought to hold on to consciousness.

"You can't hypnotize me!" he gritted, surprised that his own voice seemed so far off. "Only a willing subject, or one paralyzed by fear, can be hypnotized!"

"And you," mocked the super-man, "are utterly afraid of me! Mansfield, you are partially hypnotized at this moment. You can still act independently to some extent, which will enable you to carry out my orders in a natural manner; but you are powerless to withstand my will, Mansfield. See! I beckon. Come here, Mansfield!"

At the sound of that booming command, Mansfield found himself obeying. He went straight toward the monster, surprised at his own action, but unable to conceive an impulse to disobey. He knew that he was under mild hypnosis, yet it didn't seem to matter.

The super-man opened a drawer in the dead scientist's desk, held out a pistol. "Here, Mansfield," he said. "Shoot!"

Without knowing why he did it, Mansfield took the weapon, turned and leveled it at the wide-eyed girl.

"Awaken, Mansfield!" commanded the giant hypnotist.

Mansfield blinked his eyes, stared at Daphne in horror; the weapon slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Daphne!" he cried. "I was about to kill you!"

Thunderous laughter drowned out his voice, made the walls vibrate. "Ho-ho-ho!" roared the monster. "How white you are, Mansfield! Ho-ho-ho! Now do you think you can disobey me?"

Suddenly he sobered. "You will do what I tell you," he said. "I shall work on the cosmo-wave generator. I am having difficulty with it, because that fool scientist left no spare parts. Yet I shall devise means. My intelligence is superior to that of any man living. Meanwhile, you will take my Daphne—I find that name as good as any other—to the best shops and purchase clothes for her. Look at me, Mansfield. You will return here in exactly one hour, do you hear? *Look at me, I said!*"

But Mansfield was not looking at him; with all the power of his conscious mind he was concentrating on the weapon on the floor. He wanted to pick it up, but he felt himself already going under the spell again, and it seemed strangely impossible to bend down and snatch up the gun.

"All right—pick it up," said the giant, and Mansfield was suddenly able to reach down and grab the pistol.

He aimed it straight at the monster's heart, pressed the trigger. The roar that shattered the silence of the room was followed by a slight groan. The giant lay on the floor!

Then, to Mansfield's amazement and consternation, he got to his feet and towered over the artist. There was a small round hole in the monster's coat, but he seemed to have recovered al-

ready. He opened his shirt and revealed a pink spot where the bullet had flattened itself against his skin.

"I have not yet gotten my full strength," he growled, "or that bullet would not have had even that effect. In a day or two—" he frowned, listening. Mansfield listened, too, but heard nothing but his own breathing.

He watched while the giant stepped to the radio-vision set and dialed in a station. Evidently his telepathic powers had divined something that was being broadcast. The vision-mirror showed a scrambled scene, which clarified as the giant brought the station in more clearly. Mansfield saw a scene at the airport. A man's voice was speaking.

"The attempted flight through space to Mars has been postponed," the voice said. "The rocket-ship which you see is in readiness for the attempt, but at the last moment Professor Wingford has refused to fly it. This is a sad disappointment to us all, because there seems to be little doubt that the venture would be successful if an intelligent and fearless person could be found who would risk his life for the glory of science and our great nation! The Mars Expedition Committee has asked me to announce that any person wishing to volunteer for this great undertaking should communicate with them immediately. Every safeguard for the life of its occupant which modern science can provide is contained in the rocket-ship.

"As my listeners all know, we have received recently what seem to be radio messages from the inhabitants of Mars. Our best linguists and code experts have not yet succeeded in interpreting these messages, but we have reason to believe that the Martians are aware of the projected flight to their planet, and that they wish to encourage the enterprise.

"It will be a great disappointment to them, no doubt, as well as to all Earthmen if this experiment ends in failure, owing to the unwillingness of scientifically trained men to volunteer to pilot the ship.

"Somewhere within the sound of my voice such a person may exist. I urge such person or persons to get in touch with this station or the airport committee at once. There is no time to lose. The liquid air, which provides the cooling medium to offset atmospheric friction, has already been released in the walls of the ship—"

FROWNING, but with a thoughtful gleam in his black eyes, the giant shut off the radio-vision set and the announcer's voice was stilled; the gigantic rocket-ship and the throng surrounding it soon vanished from the mirror.

"Fools!" scoffed the monster. "Puny-minded idiots!"

"*You* are the person for that job!" cried Mansfield. "You alone could succeed. Think of the admiration you would arouse, not only among men but among the Martians! You would be the greatest hero ever born! You would be made a *king*—ruler of two planets! You would—"

But the giant silenced him with a terrible look.

"I was born to destroy," he said. "I am what I am. It pleases me to wipe out the inhabitants of this earth, to institute a super-race of my own. Only a few thousand will survive the cosmo-wave, and they shall become my slaves. I need not leave this room, Mansfield, to subjugate the entire population of the earth. There are no physical limitations to the powers of my mind—I can influence the present rulers by simply projecting my will, and they will have to obey me, just as you do! I hold in my hands the destiny of every living being

on this planet. Later, I myself will attend to Mars! The Martians, too, shall be destroyed!"

He turned and glared at Daphne.

"You are in love with this foolish artist!" he scowled. "You hate me, as he does! Very well, I will waste no more time! I will alter your glands at once. When you need clothes, they will be large ones. And your lover I will kill. I shall find other slaves!"

The girl recoiled fearfully as he advanced in a single stride and lifted her roughly in his arms.

With the speed of a panther, Mansfield sprang forward, thrust the muzzle of the pistol in the monster's ear, and fired.

The giant fell on his face. Swiftly Mansfield fired into his ear again. The monster half rose, then fell forward.

Pulling the girl to her feet, Mansfield ran with her across the fallen door and through the laboratory to the street, still clutching the gun.

"I'm afraid he's not dead even yet!" he gasped. "I heard him stirring!" As they ran, he recalled the scientist's dying words. If the monster still lived—if only cutting off his supply of oxygen could kill him—

"But who can overpower that fiend?" he thought. "If glassite can't hold him, neither could a steel prison! It's a job for scientists, not an artist like me!"

He hailed an autoplane taxi.

"Come on, Daphne!" he gasped. "We're going to volunteer to fly that rocket-ship! *We're going to Mars!*"

CHAPTER VI

A DESPERATE ATTEMPT

MOST of the spectators had left the airport when they arrived, though a considerable crowd of curious, disappointed onlookers still

surrounded the mighty, gleaming spaceship. Mansfield and Daphne pressed through and encountered a group of important-looking individuals who stood talking together. Their gloomy countenances brightened when Mansfield explained his business. Mansfield waved down their questions concerning his qualifications to pilot the ship and send back messages concerning the flight.

"I can manage it!" he shouted, glancing apprehensively over his shoulder. "There is a giant—a monster—a superman—I tried to kill him, but he may be alive yet. He will annihilate mankind unless he is somehow destroyed!"

One of the officials caught the eyes of the other. He tapped his forehead significantly; then smiled.

"I'm afraid we can't use you," said one. "You see—"

"Listen to me!" pleaded Mansfield. "I'm not crazy! This monster was brought to being in a test tube. He is super-human. Professor Thorndile—"

"Ah!" cried a chorus of voices. "*Thorndile?*"

"Yes! He is dead! His own test tube monster killed him. He will kill you, too—all of us, unless—"

"*Thorndile's mysterious experiment!*" murmured one of the officials thoughtfully. "A brilliant scientist, until a few years ago, when he announced that—"

"Quick!" yelled Mansfield. "How do you operate this ship? I have warned you about Thorndile's monster—the rest is up to you gentlemen of science!" He helped Daphne climb up the ladder, entered the rocket-ship after her.

H o p e , perplexity, consternation, doubt, fear—conflicting emotions were written in the scientists' faces. The leader suddenly decided to seize the opportunity afforded them by this lunatic. He nodded. The chief inventor mounted the ladder and showed Mansfield the most important details of the control

mechanism.

"Full instructions are printed on this chart," he said. He was looking regretfully at the beautiful girl beside the amateur pilot. "Who is this young lady?" he asked. "Must she join in this hazardous enterprise?"

A blood-curdling roar interrupted him.

Mansfield caught a glimpse of a giant grasshopper in human form soaring over the heads of the cringing, astonished spectators—straight toward the rocket-ship!

"Get out!" he yelled, touching the acceleration-button. The space-ship quivered, as gas escaped through the exhaust. While Mansfield fingered the control lever, trying frantically to remember what he had been told, the official tumbled out of the compartment, terrified at the thing he saw bounding toward them. Mansfield touched a second button in feverish hope, gave a cry of triumph as the ship's exhaust emitted a thunderous series of explosions that moved it slightly. He was getting the hang of it—this third button for the take-off, the rest to increase the speed—

He delayed the fraction of a second too long. With an ear-splitting bellow of mad rage, the monster leaped to the door of the rocket-ship, disdaining the ladder, and hauled the frightened girl outside. Mansfield, seeing the woman he loved torn from his side, did not press the take-off button. Life without Daphne—

Throwing open the door on the opposite side, he flung himself out in a

wild effort to elude the menacing hands of the monster, who bounded back into the space-ship, murder blazing in his black eyes. But again he was too late. A giant hand caught his coat-tail as he fell; Mansfield dangled in mid-air.

The explosions of the exhaust suddenly became a mighty roar—the rocket-ship shot skyward!

Mansfield found himself on the ground. He heard the gasping cries of the throng, stood up and gaped, just in time to see a silver streak vanishing in the clear blue heavens.

No one else moved; no one could move. All eyes were turned upward in stupefied amazement.

"He accidentally touched one of those buttons," Mansfield muttered. "That sent the ship off—ripped my coat. Is his hand caught in the door, held by wind-pressure? But no—he's practically beyond our atmosphere by now, and—"

Daphne stumbled toward him; he took her in his arms.

"That monster won't menace you any more," he consoled her. "He's on his way to another planet!"

"I'm glad, Graeme—glad!" cried the girl, clinging to him.

"So am I, sweet," he agreed. "Now I can make you my wife. Yes, I'm mighty glad, but—"

He grinned at the officials, who had gathered their wits and were coming forward to ply him with the questions that trembled on their lips.

"—but I sure feel sorry for the people on Mars!" Mansfield said.

THE END

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THRILLING WEIRD-TERROR NOVELETTE OF A SIN-LOST LAND BEYOND TIME!

PRINCESS OF POWER

BY FREDERIC ARNOLD KUMMER, JR.

Author of "The Stronger," etc.

Aye, Harg, the master-mage, the stealer of men's souls, would be fit antagonist for Ulf the Northman—and Targash, mightiest of the seven kingdoms of evil and tyranny, would be ample plunder—and Zora, Princess of Power, would be the bride!



Downward a taloned claw swept, tearing at the girl's body.

THE rain swept down like a flight of silver arrows, slashing with relentless fury at the towering masses of dark, igneous rock. Ulf the Northman picked his way along the narrow mountain defile, shield raised over his head as he bent into the gale. Like some fabled god of the storm he seemed, yellow hair whipping about his face, rain-soaked jerkin clinging closely to his powerful torso, lips, bitten by the cold wind from the sea, as blue as his

eyes.

Striding onward, Ulf's gaze swung from side to side in search of shelter. At the base of the cliffs, however, were only small gnarled trees, queer orchid-like flowers, shrubbery and underbrush beaten down by the fierce rain. Far different from his homeland to the north, this land of Mu; here were no great forests, wild and thick, to protect man from the storm.

The ravine along which the pathway

ran was more tortuous now, winding in and out among the mighty crags. Ulf wore under the wind's lash. Even a shepherd's hut, a cave, would be welcome . . . Suddenly he stiffened to attention, listening. Somewhere, very faintly, he could hear the sound of a harp! Music, as haunting as some half-forgotten memory, its sweet notes raising above the howl of the storm! Weird it was, yet somehow sublime; Ulf felt himself irresistibly drawn toward the source of the melody . . . but with echoes flying back and forth among the walls of basalt, this source was hard to determine.

The Northman wiped rain from his eyes. All at once he noticed a poorly defined trail, a mere goat-track, threading off between two black and glistening boulders. Along this he made his way, arriving at last in a grove of stunted tamarisk trees. Here, huddled against the face of the cliffs, was a small hut, from the half-open door of which came the furtive music, each note as poignant as a sob of pain. For a long moment Ulf stood listening, gripped by the strange melody; it tore like a jaguar's claw at his heart. Then, as a new gust of rain scourged him, he beat upon the door.

At once the sound of the harp ceased, and a breathless silence fell over the hut. Again Ulf knocked, shivering with cold. A patter of footsteps sounded inside, the door swung open.

Upon the threshold stood a girl. Slender, simply dressed, her glossy blue-black hair and old-ivory skin proclaimed her a woman of Mu. Here was an erect, upright beauty, with pride in the lift of her chin, in the tilt of her firm young breasts, in the glance of her dark, deep eyes. Like heady perfumed wine, Ulf thought, driving cool logical thought from men's brains, quickening the beat of their hearts.

"What do you wish?" the girl asked, giving him a curious half-frightened

glance.

"Warmth and shelter," Ulf replied in the sibilant Murian he had learned aboard the galley during the long sea voyage from Kesh. "Is there no hospitality in this land?"

The girl hesitated, her appraising eyes sweeping the Northman's huge form. Before she could reply, however, a man's voice, rich and vibrant as a tolling bell, echoed through the hut.

"Let him enter, Zora. Why should we, who possess nothing, be a prey to fear?"

"True." The girl stood aside. "Enter and welcome, stranger."

The yellow-haired giant, stooping, entered the hut. Its interior was poor, and roughly furnished. Beside the fire that guttered on the hearth sat a bent, slender man, a golden harp between his long tapering fingers. The harpist's eyes were covered with pale opaque films; Ulf realized at once that he was blind.

"Ah!" The man with the harp swung his sightless eyes toward the newcomer. "An outlander, and one of mighty size!"

Ulf halted in his tracks, a look of amazement on his face.

"By Wotan!" he cried. "What dark arts are these? In this land do the blind see?"

"Only with the ears." The harpist smiled, his cheeks ruddy in the fire-light. "Your accent reveals you an outlander, and the floorboards creak as under great weight. Zora" . . . he turned to the girl. . . . "let the stranger have wine."

THE girl nodded, took a flagon from the shelf. Ulf drained the cup she gave him at a gulp, moved nearer the fire. A huge and barbaric figure he made, with his leathern jerkin, his bright bronze sword, his cowhide sandals, the straps of which criss-crossed

his muscular legs halfway to the knees.

"Who are you?" the girl asked. "And from what far country do you come? Never have I seen one with such fair skin, nor eyes the color of distant hills!"

The Northman grinned, brushed back his long bright hair.

"Ulf, I am called," he said. "Ulf the Ganger, which in our speech means 'the Rover'. From the great forests of the northlands I come. There the people are many and game is scarce. Already some of our tribes are moving into the valleys of Ind. Others have gone northward, toward the sea, and still others have turned toward the isles of Hellas. I, hearing of the mighty people of Mu, came south through Carchemish, through Eridu where the men of Sumer dwell, across the rich land between the rivers to the six-walled city of Ormuz, taking passage there in a galley for Mu. Three moons we sailed, touching at many isles of the sea, until we reached your port of Zac. Thence inland I have come, seeking the marvels which men say lie here among these Lemurian hills."

"Eh? Marvels in plenty!" The blind man frowned, and the dark shadows flickered across his face. "Here in Targash, mightiest of the seven kingdoms of Mu, is evil and black tyranny! Ethu, the City of Fear, ruled by Harg, master-mage, who steals men's souls! Unless we find the Place of Power . . ."

"Hush, Memar!" The girl rose, a pale wraith, her eyes wide with dread. She opened the door, peered into the sodden, rain-swept darkness, then returned. "Speak not of Harg, while his servants roam the hills!"

"By Wotan!" Ulf laughed, gripping the hilt of his sword. "Harg . . . the City of Fear . . . Place of Power? What old wives' tale is this, with talk of spells and necromancy?"

For a long moment neither the blind

man nor the girl spoke. Then Memar's voice rose in a deep whisper.

"Old is Mu, outlander, older than man's reckoning. And here are things beyond all understanding. Laugh not at the black arts. Even I can cast spells . . . of a kind." He picked up the golden harp, ran his fingers over its strings. "Judge for yourself if there be sorcery in Mu. See now with the eyes of the blind! See your home in the north!"

Then music was pouring from the golden harp . . . soft, nostalgic music, weaving a dim pattern of dreams. Throbbing notes, quivering like tear-choked voices, rose above the scream of the gale and Ulf, chin in hand before the fire, felt memories crowd his brain. Now the harpist, the slender, dark-eyed girl, were fading from his gaze. The room itself seemed to disappear, giving way to strange fantastic shapes far off. Slowly these shapes took form, and Ulf could see the dark forests of the north, the rough-hewn huts of his people, the long rows of ox-carts setting out in search of new lands, new homes. Figures were emerging from the huts . . . tall maidens with flaxen hair, huge and powerful warriors carrying spears and axes, bearded chieftains in horned helmets.

Softer grew the music of the harp and Ulf seemed to smell the first wood flowers at the time of snow-melting, hear the lowing of oxen, feel the warm sunlight scattering through the great firs and pines. The home-camp, the fair lands of the north . . .

Abruptly the melody changed, and the scene faded from Ulf's eyes. Now the music was wild, fierce, and the flames on the hearth leaped as though in exultation, causing the shadows to do a black mad dance against the walls. Louder and more furious grew the sound of the harp, till it seemed to Ulf that he could hear the clash of weapons,

the shouts of warriors, the groans of the dying. Of war, of battle, the harp sang, and a red mist clouded the Northman's gaze. Suddenly he was on his feet, clutching the hilt of his great sword.

"Out arms!" he cried. "Out arms! Let the death-ravens . . ."

"Peace, Ulf the Ganger." Memar smiled, laying aside his harp. "Now do you know there is magic in this land of Mu!"

"Eh?" Ulf gazed about, bewildered, then shook himself. "By the True Gods! I thought myself at Nieperheim again, with the arrows flying, the little dark men of the south creeping through the tall grass . . . Magic indeed, Blind One! Rather would I face a dozen wolves than touch yonder harp! Surely such playing would make a coward brave! Even. . . ."

"Wait! Hush!" Memar arose with a sweep of his robes, raised a hand for silence. "Men come along the path! I hear the clink of armor, the sound of footsteps! May the gods grant they be not the followers of Harg!"

ULF listened, but his keen hunter's ear could catch no sound above the whine of the wind. Old Memar's powers of hearing, the eyes of the blind, were, however, not deceived. A hoarse shout echoed outside, followed by a thunder of knocks upon the door.

Memar stood very still, gripping his harp. Zora was an alabaster image, hands pressed to her breasts, eyes like the pits of hell. Suddenly, the rude wooden door burst open, and a dozen red-cloaked warriors swept into the room.

"By Koth!" their black-bearded, dark-skinned leader shouted. "The Princess Zora and Memar, the royal harpist! At last! Seize them!"

Two of the swarthy Murians leaped forward . . . and as they did so, Ulf

sprang from the shadows, sword in hand.

"Ha!" The black-bearded captain spun about, aghast at sight of the grim-faced giant plunging toward him. "Slay me this outlander!"

Ulf laughed in berserk exultation as his long blade lashed out. Through armor, through bone, it sheared, and one of the scarlet-cloaked followers fell to the floor. At the same instant the Northman's heavy bronze-bossed shield swung wide, crashing into the face of a second warrior. With a groan the man dropped his spear, staggered back.

"Behind me, girl!" Ulf shouted. "Lead the Blind One!"

Swiftly Zora obeyed, drawing Memar to a corner of the hut. Before them stood Ulf, legs wide, crimsoned sword raised.

With a roar of rage more of the warriors surged forward, urged on by their leader. Blows rained upon Ulf's shield like hammers on an anvil, sweat beaded the giant's brow. Whistling, his sword descended, and a stocky Murian, split to the waist, fell apart like the two halves of a nut. In that instant a curved blade darted above the Northman's guard, tracing a red furrow across his shoulder.

Still the men of Mu pressed forward, clambering over their comrades' bodies. The floor of the hut was slippery with blood, the clash of arms, the groans of the dying, made the place hideous with noise. Zora, standing behind the Northman, stared at him in amazement.

"Never has mortal man carried on such a fight!" she whispered. "Yet against a score of warriors there is no hope. . . ."

Even as she spoke, Ulf tensed his hardy muscles.

"Stay close, girl!" he gasped. "You and the Blind One! We must cut our way out of this trap! Aie!" He flung

up his shield to ward off a savage blow.

"Tonight the death-ravens shall have their fill!"

Forward the huge Northman leaped, his sword cleaving a path through the scarlet-cloaked men. Rising and falling with terrible regularity, the blade hewed through armor, shield, and bone. The Murians, their dark eyes flecked with fear, retreated toward the doorway, aghast at the fury of this blond giant. Marked by a score of wounds, his fierce features set in a wild smile, he seemed an apparition from another world.

"Gods of Ethu!" the gorgeously-apparelled captain muttered. "Is this some familiar of Memar's?"

Ulf laughed, a deep booming laugh, pressed forward again, Zora and the blind harpist close behind. Back, the Murians fell, driven by the huge sword as cattle by a lash. Two paces more and he had reached the doorway, and freedom . . . but at that moment a scream sounded behind him. Ulf glanced over his shoulder. Two of the Murian warriors, driven outside, had circled the hut, forced open its shuttered window, and leaped into the room at his rear. Now they were dragging Memar and Zora away.

"Ulf!" the girl cried despairingly. "Ulf!"

The Northman saw her lifted toward the open casement, then a sword, licking toward his chest, forced him to face his opponents once more. In vain he leaped backwards toward the window; Zora and the blind man, in the hands of their assailants, had already been dragged from the room.

Hoarse orders sounded in the darkness; at once the warriors who had held the door sprang through it, into the black rain-swept night. Ulf, a panting, bloody figure, dashed furiously out in pursuit. Already the party of Murians had disappeared in the whirling storm,

and Memar and Zora with them. Ulf swore. Who were these men? Their leader had called the girl a princess. . . . And who was Harg?

Suddenly far down the ravine, Ulf heard a scream . . . a woman's voice! Hot rage filled the Northman; he had been outwitted, tricked by the little brown men of Mu! Sword in hand he set out along the ravine in grim pursuit.

CHAPTER II

FOR hours Ulf followed the rocky path . . . but the little mountain men, familiar with every trail, every by-path, eluded him. Dawn brought an end to the rain; ruddy sunlight struck fire from the wet rocks.

The path widened as Ulf pressed on, showing signs of constant travel. Suddenly, upon reaching the top of a small rise, a cry of wonder broke from his lips. Before him lay a staggering spectacle, bizarre, unreal.

Far below, at the base of the cliffs upon which he stood, lay a vast city, a mass of marble, of green Egyptian porphyry, of dark obsidian. Terrace upon terrace, columned halls, broad streets along which the chariots of scarlet-cloaked warriors dashed, drawn by horned, deer-like creatures, swifter than horses. Between the stately buildings were flowered gardens, silver fountains, marble-lined pools, giving a rare exotic beauty to the scene. Incredibly old, this great city, and of such cyclopean proportions as to seem the work of titans. Temples, fortresses, palaces, loomed immense, gigantic above the lesser buildings; they were grim, implacable, somehow awe-inspiring.

Ulf shook his head, bewildered. Even more vast than the city itself were the cliffs which surrounded it. On all sides, rising sheer from the plain, they

towered, hundreds of feet in height, with the city at their base seeming but dregs in a gargantuan wine-cup of sable stone. At Ulf's feet a path wound zig-zag down the face of the precipice, but beyond this one roadway he saw no means of reaching the valley below. Shaking off the eerie spell of this rock-bound city, the Northman began the steep and perilous descent.

The sun was high in the heavens before he had completed it. Striding swiftly along, oblivious to the curious stares of passersby, he crossed the gardens and flower-strewn fields of the suburbs and entered the city itself.

Broad streets stretched before him . . . streets crowded with throngs passing from shop to shop, from bazaar to bazaar. Goods from a hundred ports lay upon the stalls and counters. Here were rich silks from China, as gossamer as woven spiders' webs; swords and daggers from Uighur, keen blades, their handles richly encrusted with coral and lapis-lazuli; sweet scents and ointments from Magan and Punt; cunningly-worked gold ornaments from the land of Ophir; fragrant spices from the isles of the sea. A rich city, it seemed and powerful.

Yet on the faces of the people who crowded the streets, one emotion was predominant . . . fear! Uneasy whisperings ran from mouth to mouth, nervous eyes glanced over shoulders as though in terror of being followed, sudden tense silence greeted the passage of Harg's red-cloaked warriors. Fear . . . fear that froze the lips of garrulous age, hushed the gay laughter of youth, stilled the shouts of children. Fear that made life-long friends suspicious of each other, fear like a dark cloud swirling through the streets of the city, relentless, all-enveloping, terrible! The blind harpist's words flashed across Ulf's brain. "Ethu, City of Fear, ruled by Harg, master-mage, who steals

men's souls. . . ."

Suddenly a big chariot dashed along the street, its driver clearing a path through the throngs with blows of his long whip. Men, women, and children felt the stinging lash, yet none so much as raised a voice in protest.

"The cowards!" Ulf cried. "They outnumber these tyrants a hundred to one! Why don't they rise, throw off the yoke!"

"Hush, outlander!" An old man behind a coppersmith's stall plucked at Ulf's arm. "Quiet, as you value your life!"

"Eh," The Northman turned. "Is courage forbidden in this place?"

"Aye, stranger." The ancient glanced about, spoke in a hushed whisper. "This much I may say, since your skin and speech proclaim you no creature of Harg's. Great was Ethu, once the most powerful of all the seven cities of Mu. Until Harg came. Terrible in war, a master of the forbidden secrets, he gathered about him the discontented, the ruthless, the ignorant, and seized the throne of Ethu, slaying our kindly ruler, Jactor, driving the Princess Zora into exile. Only a handful follow Harg, yet the people dare not rise, for he has stolen their souls. Nay, not by his spells or dark arts. By fear! Everywhere are his spies, so that no man dares trust his neighbor. A grumble of discontent, a mutter of rebellion, and that one disappears into the mines, the dungeons. The spirit of even the bravest warriors is broken and they submit, not daring to resist. So Ethu has become the City of Fear!"

THE NORTHMAN nodded, his eyes brooding on the dreary faces of the passersby.

"Aye," he muttered. "So a grey wolf rules the pack. Should the others turn upon him, he must surely die. Yet because they fear their leader, he com-

mands. Is there no way of breaking this spell of terror?"

The old coppersmith glanced nervously about once more, his rheumy eyes narrow.

"One way there is," he said softly. "The Place of Power! Somewhere among these cliffs it lies, a sacred spot, an ancient shrine. And who finds it, so runs the legends of our people, shall rule all Ethu. Five years have passed since Princess Zora and Memar, the harpist, escaped Harg, fled to the hills. Since that time, it is whispered, a strange and beautiful girl has been seen, leading a blind man along the cliffs as though seeking something. Day after day, year after year, they appear, smiling on the goatherds and shepherds of the hills, avoiding the followers of Harg. Perhaps they are Memar and the princess Zora, searching for the Place of Power. If they should find it . . ." The old man stopped, shrank back into the shadows of his shop, as a tramp of marching men echoed along the street.

Ulf shook his head, frowning. These prophecies, spells, and strange fears were beyond him. A well-balanced sword, the trail of a wounded stag, the scent of wood-fires in the forests . . . they were the things he knew, understood. He turned to glance over the heads of the crowd at the procession . . . and his heart leaped.

Warriors, fully a score of them, wearing brazen helmets and breastplates, marched along in double ranks. And between the files of men walked Zora, leading the blind Memar, her head high!

"Mighty Wotan!" Ulf muttered. Then, gripping the arm of the man who stood next to him. "Where do the guards take them?"

"I . . . I . . ." The man cringed as Ulf's fingers tightened. "To the temple of Koth! Where dwells the

Winged One, Lord of Evil!" He pointed, his finger trembling.

Ulf followed the man's gaze. At the end of the roadway rose a great sable structure, a six-sided pyramid. Hoary with age, tomb-like, its immense blocks covered with queer symbols, the building seemed to breathe the very spirit of death!

"I can tell you nothing!" the man whimpered. "Ask me no more . . ."

"Bah!" Ulf released his victim with a contemptuous laugh, glanced at the crowds that lined the streets. They turned away, eyes averted, as the procession passed. Ulf spat scornfully. Cowards! Afraid to give even a sigh of sympathy lest it be overheard by Harg's spies. United they might sweep these scarlet-cloaked warriors from the city . . . black fear gripped their brains, kept them silent.

The guards were abreast of him, now, their eyes fixed sternly ahead. Suddenly in the dense throng of people Zora observed Ulf, and an involuntary cry broke from her lips.

"The outlander!" she exclaimed.

At once the leader of the guards spun about, caught sight of Ulf standing in the shadow of the coppersmith's doorway.

"It is he!" the Murian shouted. "The one who fought us in the hills! Seize him!"

Ulf leaped forward, drawing his sword. No chance of escape with a dozen of the little brown men converging on him. But perhaps, by resisting, he might kindle a spark in the breasts of these timorous townsfolk . . . With a ringing war-cry he faced the foe, shield on arm, great bronze blade raised.

The Murians, however, had a weapon new to him . . . long cords at the ends of which hung round metal weights. Like striking snakes the ropes shot out, coiling tightly about the

Northman's body. In vain Ulf tried to cut them, free himself. Even as he struggled, more ropes encircled him, pinning his arms to his body. Within the space of three breaths he was helpless.

"So!" The captain of the guard laughed mockingly. "This time it is we who win! Take the sword from him. He also will meet judgment at the temple of Koth! The Winged One shall feast!"

CHAPTER III

THE great hall of the temple was cloaked in gloom; a myriad flickering blue lamps threw grotesque, sprawling shadows across the tessalated floor. Weird bas-reliefs, monstrous bestialities, half-man, half-beast, writhed in obscene procession along the walls. From countless jewelled braziers coils of aromatic smoke rose, serpent-wise, disappearing at length in the dim reaches far above.

The rear of this immense room was strangely bare. Here were two massive bronze doors, securely barred. Before them stood a block of stone, an altar, perhaps four feet square; the black grime of centuries obscured its rough-hewn surface, giving it an air of vast antiquity.

The front of the temple was crowded with a dark mass of humanity. Guards in crimson cloaks and burnished brass helmets were ranged along the walls . . . vulpine priests of Koth, their sable robes marked with cabalistic designs, chanted a weird, moaning melody.

Upon a carved jade throne near the center of the hall sat Harg. Tall was the ruler of Ethu, and powerful, with hair and beard like jet. A man in the prime of life, yet his eyes seemed as old as time, bottomless pools in which lurked strange desires, monstrous long-

ings, the dim atavistic secrets of those who have passed beyond the dark river of death. Corpse-like in the blue light of the lamps, he sat motionless, oblivious to the slaves who fawned at his feet.

Somewhere in the shadows a bell suddenly tolled, the chant of the priests ceased. The file of guards pushed through the throng, urging their captives forward. Reflectively Harg studied the three figures, then his voice broke the hollow silence.

"I bid you welcome, Princess Zora." Harg's gaze swept the girl's slender, exquisitely-modelled figure. "Five years have changed a frightened child to a woman of rare beauty." He turned to the harpist, who stood before the throne, smiling the patient, sublime smile of the blind. "And you, Memar! Have you forgotten the day we passed the bowl of molten copper before your eyes, then turned you, sightless and cringing into the streets? Yet we should have slain you, since you somehow managed to free the Princess Zora, escape with her to the hills. This time we will make no such mistake." Harg turned to Ulf. "This outlander I do not know, yet he fights in your cause."

"No!" Zora pleaded. "He has no knowledge of these matters. A stranger only, to whom we gave wine and shelter."

"The blood of my warriors is upon his hands," Harg said harshly. "He too, shall face the Winged One!"

Ulf made no reply; his glance roved the dark temple. If he could free himself, seize a javelin from one of the guards, there might be a chance. Slowly, imperceptibly, he began to work at his bonds.

Harg, staring at the prisoners, gave a mocking laugh.

"By Koth!" he cried, turning to the parchment-skinned priest beside him. "See, Sagan! Three of them, like the

three virtues! Beauty, Wisdom and Strength! Let us amuse ourselves by testing their several powers!" He beckoned to the guards who held Zora.

The girl stood erect before the throne, her sheer robes clinging to her lithe young body like petals to a lotus bud.

"So." Harg played with his ebon beard. "What says the first of our three virtues? Can Beauty save herself and her companions from the vengeance of Koth?"

Zora swayed slightly, choked by the thick, dulling incense that filled the hall.

"Free them," she whispered, "and my beauty shall be yours!"

"Thus speaks woman." Harg laughed, motioning to the three female slaves who crouched at his feet. Obediently they stood up, their near-nude bodies gleaming in the lambent blue light. "See, Zora, here are three more lovely and desirable than you! The most perfect of Egypt, Ind, and Mu! Shall I trade their love for your hate? Nay! The first of our virtues, Beauty, has failed! Let Memar speak!"

TO the foot of the dais they dragged the blind harpist. Ulf paused momentarily in his struggle to loosen his bonds as a wild, inhuman screaming sounded from behind the great bronze doors.

"The Winged One grows impatient!" Harg murmured. "So much the greater his rage when the moment comes! You, Memar, are the second of our three opponents . . . Wisdom! Match your skill against my sorcerers, overcome them, and you and your companions go free!"

"Nay, mock me not," the blind man whispered. "I am no wizard . . . only a maker of music . . ."

"True!" Harg nodded. "I had forgotten. Bring him his harp!"

Servants ran from the hall, returned

with the golden lyre, thrust it into Memar's hands. The old man raised his sightless eyes, and his lips moved.

"Oh Gods of the Sombre Heavens!" he cried. "Aid me!"

Now Sagan, the yellow-faced priest, was facing Memar, a thin smile about his mouth. A vulture-like figure in his black robe and hood, the necromancer bent over a glowing brazier, tossed a handful of powder upon the red coals.

Ulf, watching, felt the hair at the back of his neck stiffen; Zora's hands fluttered to her throat in a vain attempt to choke her frightened cries.

Great pillars of smoke were rising above the brazier, smoke that writhed and twisted as though alive. Sagan was muttering, making strange motions with his hands. Ulf felt a curious tingling run through his veins and his body seemed held in an iron grasp; try as he might, he could not turn his head. The steady monotonous movement of Sagan's long hands was somehow irresistible. Slowly the great hall, the flickering lamps, began to blur, to whirl in kaleidoscopic patterns. Part of him, Ulf felt, was leaving his body, entering the dark folds of smoke that seemed the gateway to another world. Infinite reaches of time and space stretched before him, a grey void filled with tortured faces, dark miasmic shapes, hideous intangible spectres that were at once as large as the universe and small as a mote of dust. Deeper and deeper he entered into this dark world; in another moment the thin conscious thread linking him to his material body would be snapped and he, Ulf, would be lost . . . lost forever in this timeless, limitless cosmos. . . .

Then suddenly Sagan was speaking; his taunting voice seemed eons away.

"Play, harpist!" he cried. "Weave your magic melodies to counteract this spell!"

Ulf, as though gazing down from a

great height, saw Memar raise the harp, seek to strike its strings. Sagan, the veins of his forehead standing out like taut cords, leaned forward, the force of his will flowing like a dark river to engulf his opponent. In vain Memar tried to touch the strings; invisible bonds held his hands still.

"Play, harpist, if you can!" Sagan mocked. "Koth, Lord of Night, would hear your tunes!"

Again Memar sought to pluck the lyre, and again the supernal power of Sagan's will held him motionless.

"It is no use," the old man whispered brokenly. "I cannot play!"

Then Harg's voice pierced the black mists about Ulf's brain.

"So Wisdom, too, has failed!" it said. "Give them back their souls, Sagan!"

The priest stretched out his hand, and the blue flames leaped like storm-lashed waves, the swirling smoke disappeared. Ulf heard a mighty voice calling him back . . . back . . . and the formless spectres clutched at him in vain. The grey mists faded, the wailing cries died away, and all at once he was in the hall again, with Harg like a silent statue on his dais, grinning sardonically.

"Wisdom and Beauty have failed!" Harg paused as from beyond the massive doors came once more the weird demoniacal screaming. "Strength shall now be tested! Barbarian, do you fear the Winged One?"

Ulf shook the cobwebs from his brain, squared his shoulders.

"We of the north know no fear, black-beard," he laughed. "In our forests men are free to fight, to love, to laugh as pleases them! Loose my hands, give me a sword, and I meet death as man should!"

"So speaks Strength, ever boastful!" Harg murmured. "Grant him his desire! At once!"

Swiftly the guards led their three

captives before the square block of stone at the far end of the room. Arms outstretched, as though crucified, Zora huddled against it; at her side stood Memar, grave, erect, his groping hands touching the ancient altar. Now the guards loosened Ulf's bonds, placed his great bronze sword in his hands. Spears raised menacingly, they forced him forward to join his companions.

The big Northman had just reached the altar stone when a clanking of hidden mechanism came to his ears. Whirling, he saw a huge portcullis, its bars as thick as a man's arm, drop slowly from above, dividing the square hall of the temple in two. On one side, Zora, Memar, and himself, grouped before the black stone . . . on the other, Harg, and his followers, gazing with avid fascination through the metal bars.

Suddenly a shout went up. The ponderous doors behind the black altar were beginning to swing open. The priests of Koth began a mystic chant.

Ulf gripped his sword, waiting. From behind the doors came strange, inhuman sounds. Memar gasped and his face went pale.

"Moa, the Winged One!" he muttered. "It is Moa!"

Ulf tensed his muscles. Something huge, unbelievable, was stalking through the darkness of the doorway. A stench of carrion, a scrabble of claws . . . and then Moa, the Winged One, stood before him, blinking in the blue light of the lamps.

"Mighty Wotan!" Ulf cried, gazing in wonder at the apparition. Huge, it was, towering twice the size of a tall man; two immense feathered legs supported a clumsy bird body, while its long neck terminated in a narrow head, a cruel pointed beak. Small red eyes glittered wickedly as, fluttering its short but powerful wings, the gigantic bird strode forward, loathsome, savage as some denizen of the pit.

Suddenly Zora screamed. The Winged One sprang toward her with incredible swiftness. Downward a taloned claw swept, barely grazing the girl's body. Zora slumped to her knees, the creature drew back its huge pointed beak for a swift deadly blow.

With a shout Ulf leaped forward, brushing past the blind and helpless Memar.

At sound of the Northman's deep-throated war-cry the Moa hesitated, turned to face its new antagonist. A huge claw lashed out and Ulf was barely able to leap safely aside.

Cautiously he circled his immense opponent, seeking an opening. Then, as the Moa's beak stabbed down at him, it came. Again Ulf dodged, stepping in with a swinging stroke of his sword. Feathers flew, and a red gash appeared upon the bird's breast.

Now the Winged One, mad with rage and pain, was lunging furiously at the Northman, seeking to drive him into a corner. Against the square black altar Zora and Memar crouched, their faces grey with fear. Harg and the priests of Koth, on the other side of the portcullis, were waiting, silent, eager . . .

Suddenly the Moa, with a flutter of its stubby wings, plunged again. Panting, Ulf side-stepped . . . but one of those short, immensely powerful wings struck his shoulder, sent him sprawling upon the floor. With a shrill scream of triumph, the huge bird sprang for the Kill!

Stunned, Ulf watched the sharp beak draw back, swing downward like some gigantic battleaxe. . . . The stench of decay, the fiery, furious eyes, the flapping wings. . . . ! Blinely he raised his sword in an effort to ward off the blow, held it firm . . . and a roar of rage went up from Harg's followers. The Moa's down-sweeping neck had struck the edge of the raised blade; the huge bird had decapitated itself!

Dazed, Ulf heard the short head crash upon the marble floor, saw blood gush from the severed neck. Thrashing convulsively, the mighty truncated body fell against the portcullis.

"Ulf!" Zora ran toward him. "Gods of Mu! You are not hurt?"

The shouts of the priests of Koth drowned the girl's cries.

"Moa is dead! He has slain Moa! Death to the barbarian! Death to them all! Mighty Harg, let us kill!"

Harg arose, his face dark with fury.

"Freedom I promised them if they could best my servants," he cried. "And it shall be theirs! Free them, followers of Koth! Free their spirits from their earthly bodies!"

A roar of assent answered him. Slowly, inch by inch, with a clanking of chains, the heavy portcullis began to rise from the floor.

Ulf faced the dark figures who waited, knives gleaming, eyes red with hate.

"A tyrant's word!" he said scornfully. "Better the promise of a slave!" Then, raising his dripping bronze blade, "before I fall many of these shall also be . . . freed! Make peace with your gods, Zora, Princess of Ethu! Tonight we pass beyond. . . ."

"Nay." It was Memar's voice, rising high with triumph. "See! The inscription upon this slab. . . ."

ULF whirled. The old harpist was still crouched beside the square altar, his hands pressed against its side. The Northman frowned; he could see nothing on the black, grime-encrusted stone.

"Eh?" he muttered. "Inscription? Are you mad, Blind One? There are no markings here!"

"Not for you who rely upon your eyes," the old man said impatiently. "Yet can my fingers trace the glyphs which dirt obscures. A message it is

... a message from the ancient ones, the builders of Ethu! 'Through this rock may the Place of Power be gained.' Hear, outlander! The Place of Power for which I have sought so long! Quick! Smite now this stone!"

One glance Ulf threw over his shoulder. Already the great portcullis was two feet from the ground. In another minute the priests and warriors would be able to pass beneath. . . .

"Stand aside, harpist!" he cried. "And pray your sense of touch has not played you false! Wotan, give me strength!"

Legs planted wide, muscles knotted, Ulf lifted his massive bronze sword. The rock, he noticed, was of glassy basalt, and might therefore split. . . .

"Ulf!" Zora cried. "They come!"

Once about his head the Northman whirled the sword, making the keen blade whistle through the air. Then, with every ounce of his strength Ulf brought it down upon the blackened stone!

With a sound like thunder the crash of bronze on basalt echoed throughout the hall . . . followed by a shout of wonder from the onrushing priests of Koth. The Northman's blow had split the altar in two! And the two sections, toppling apart, revealed a dark opening . . . a passage!

"Down!" Ulf cried. "Make haste!"

Zora seiged Memar's hand, led him down the rough-hewn steps of the tunnel. Ulf paused long enough to hurl a fragment of shattered rock at his foremost pursuer, then leaped into the opening at Memar's heels!

CHAPTER IV

THE passageway along which the three fugitives ran was cloaked in stygian gloom. The thick dust of centuries was stirred by their

thudding feet. Ulf could hear behind them the hoarse shouts of their pursuers, the clatter of arms.

"On!" he exclaimed. "Haste!" Here is no room to fight!"

Forward they raced, all three as blind as Memar in the darkness. Any step, Ulf knew, might bring them to some pitfall, some trap, but with Harg's men on their trail they must risk it. Hearts pounding, breath coming in gasps, they stumbled on.

The passage was broadening now; it seemed to Ulf that they passed through vaulted rooms peopled with towering statues, through ancient dungeons, on the walls of which hung mouldering chains, through massive crypts, tombs of long-dead kings of Mu.

Suddenly Ulf felt the gallery turn sharply, slant upwards. Zora gasped, stumbled from exhaustion.

"Courage, girl!" Ulf caught her, helped her on. "This mole's burrow must end soon!"

Half-supporting, half-carrying the girl, he staggered up the steep incline. Old Memar, with strength surprising in his slight frame, managed to keep pace. Harg's followers were drawing closer with each moment; the red flare of their torches danced like witch-fires upon the ancient wall of the gallery.

All at once Memar, in the lead, gave a cry. His outstretched hands had encountered a tangle of vines; he drew them aside and Ulf could see pale streaks of light before them.

"Free!" Memar gasped, plunging through the mass of vines. Ulf, still carrying Zora, followed.

Blinking in the brilliant sunlight, the Northman glanced about . . . and his heart sank. They were on a shelf projecting from the face of the cliffs that surrounded the City of Fear! Above them the rocky wall rose sheer for a hundred feet; below, it dropped straight in a terrifying precipice to the plain.

Ulf could see Ethu, its shining marble buildings bright against the green grass and trees. No sound of lutes, no hum of voices, no cheerful noises of everyday life, rose from the City of Fear. Still, silent, it lay, shrouded in a cringing, soulless dread.

Ulf's gaze lifted from the city to the ledge on which they stood. Some twenty paces in length, it broke off sharply at either end, precluding any chance of escape. A short distance from the tunnel's mouth was what appeared to be an ancient shrine, cut into the face of the cliff. Worn by wind and rain, it was no more than three broad semi-circular steps, leading to a large niche formed like some immense sea-shell and carved from the black basalt. The niche, although of the type in which a statue or altar might be placed, was empty. Gazing at the shrine, the Northman shook a hopeless head.

Then old Memar was speaking, querulously.

"Where have we come?" he asked. "Is this the Place of Power?"

"A rocky shelf, no more," Ulf snapped. "Here is no Power! The inscriptions of the ancient ones lied, harpist! We die!"

Exultant shouts issued from the opening in the face of the cliff. Suddenly a wild-eyed priest of Koth leaped from the tunnel, knife in hand. Downward swept Ulf's gleaming blade and the priest crumpled. A red-cloaked warrior sprang through the narrow entrance, only to fall before the Northman's sword.

"Come from your hole, rats!" Ulf laughed. "The dark ravens of death circle low!"

From the tunnel rushed more warriors, their spears darting out like snake's fangs. Deliberately, warily, they fought, driving the Northmen slowly back . . . back . . . until the mouth of the passage was clear. Now

Ulf was forced to retreat along the shelf, toward the ancient shrine; doggedly he fell back, leaving a trail of dead and wounded in his wake.

Zora, watching, gave a gasp of despair; the struggle could have but one end. She glanced at Memar, an abject figure, still clutching his beloved harp; the old man's face was dark, despondent.

"The inscription was false!" he muttered. "The old one lied! So shall Ethu remain the City of Fear, and its princess perish at the hand of Harg! Doomed is Targish! Doomed, the greatest of the seven kingdoms of Mu!"

Back fell Ulf, fighting with berserk fury, yielding stubbornly before the weight of numbers. Zora could see Harg, a tall sepulchral figure, battle-axe in hand, urging his followers on. The girl sighed hopelessly. If only something, some miracle, would occur . . . Weakly she stumbled toward the old, weatherbeaten shrine, fell to her knees on the first of the broad steps.

"Gods of Mu!" she cried. "Aid us!"

HARDLY had the girl spoken when her voice, magnified a thousand times, rolled through the valley below.

"Gods of Mu!" the mighty echo thundered. "Aid us!"

Stunned at the forces she had unwittingly loosened, Zora crouched, frozen, before the shrine. Then Memar was groping his way toward her, his face exultant.

"The Place of Power!" he cried. "True were the words of the old ones! People of Ethu, awake!" And like the tolling of some mighty bell, his words reverberated through the valley. "Awake! Awake!"

At once faint cries of amazement, of wonder, rose from the great white city below. Crowds of men and women were pouring into the broad streets, seeking the source of the great voice that called

them.

Tall and erect as in his youth, the blind harpist stood on the first of the shrine's three steps, the wind whipping his tattered robes, his long grey hair. Swiftly Memar's fingers swept the strings of his harp, his voice rose in the ancient war-song of Ethu.

To Ulf, bleeding from a score of wounds, the savage melody was like spiced wine. Standing before the three massive steps, he held back the red-cloaked warriors with a rain of blows.

"Sing on, Memar!" he cried. "Hai, Wotan!" His sword lashed out, splitting a guardsman's helm. "Thus fight we of the north!"

With a roar of rage the warriors pressed toward him. Ulf was driven back onto the first of the three broad steps leading to the shell-shaped shrine. As the tide of battle surged over the lowest level, Zora and Memar climbed up to the second.

If the mighty voice had been loud upon the bottom step, it was now deafening. Redoubled it its volume, the stirring song rolled across the valley, a paen of courage, quickening the blood, lifting men's souls until they felt themselves one with the gods. Zora could hear those in the city below take up the mighty, surging chorus! Sunlight flashed on knives, swords, as the aroused people swirled through the streets. No longer was Ethu a City of Fear; its people, caught in the spell of Memar's fierce war-song, had thrown off the yoke of dread.

There was fighting in the city; the furious populace were attacking those who had been left to hold Ethu. It was a matter of minutes only until the city was in the hands of its people. Now they were streaming across the plain toward the Place of Power, bearing ladders, ropes, for scaling the cliffs. Zora bit her lips. Would the Northman hold back their opponents until the men of Ethu

arrived?

Wilder grew Memar's playing, raising above the echoed clash of swords, the war-cries of Harg's guardsmen. Ulf swayed from exhaustion, yet somehow managed to hold the first of the three broad steps leading to the niche.

"Cowards!" It was Harg's voice, deep with scorn. "Will you let one man put you to flight? And with Zora, the Place of Power, so nearly in our grasp! Stand aside!"

Face waxey, pallid, luminous eyes aglow with hatred, Harg raised his heavy battle-axe.

"So, barbarian!" he smiled gloomily. "One of us dies!"

"You, then!" Ulf cried, with a swinging stroke of his sword.

SIX hours before, his blow had been fatal; now, weary, weak from loss of blood, Ulf barely touched Harg's chest. Teeth bared in an exultant snarl, the dark Murian swung his axe mightily.

Instinctively Ulf threw up his shield . . . but the force of the blow sent him staggering backwards, stunned. He toppled heavily onto the second step, lay there, lacking the strength to rise. Dimly he could see Harg spring forward, lift the gleaming axe. . . .

AT that instant the blind harpist, now standing on the third level, in the very center of the hollowed niche, struck the harp strings with savage force. Thunderous, deafening, the mighty chords echoed with terrifying violence. Here in the center of the shrine was indeed the Place of Power, magnifying the waves of sound until the shelf of rock, the black wall of basalt, trembled . . . quivered like the strings of Memar's harp.

Ulf, crouching dazed upon the steps, felt the mountainside rock under the stupendous cacophony of sound. Harg

reeled as though struck a physical blow, and the axe fell from his hand. The scarlet-cloaked warriors, the priests of Koth, staggered, clutching at one another for support, their faces pale, panicky, as the cliffs heaved and swayed.

Still Memar played. An ominous, rumbling was audible above; a rattle of pebbles and loose stones. Ulf, recollecting the snowy passes of the Caucasus where a voice raised in song might bring down tons of snow, dragged himself to his knees.

Suddenly Harg, wild-eyed, lips twisted in fear and rage, found voice.

"Kill the harpist!" he screamed.

A maddened priest of Koth drew back his arm . . . but before he could hurl his knife, the storm broke. With a terrible crackling roar, a huge section of the cliffs above crumbled. Stones, earth, slid down in great slabs, clouds of dust blotted out the brilliant sunlight. The Place of Power heaved like a storm-tossed ship.

Dimly Ulf remembered Zora dragging him up to the third level, into the shelter of the niche, while the rumbling avalanche poured down from above. One glimpse, he had, of Harg, a bloody, agonized figure in the rain of boulders, calling wildly on Koth, then all sight was lost in the choking billows of dust. Protected by the deep-cut niche, the three fugitives huddled against the wall, listening to the crash of falling rock.

Suddenly, almost as quickly as it had begun, the shaking of the earth ceased. A gust of wind swept away the dusty mists and Ulf, staring down, gasped. The precipice that had lain before them was gone! In its place was a long, rough slope stretching down to the plain below, where the people of Ethu were assembled. Freed from the grip of fear, they advanced up the rubbed incline, voices raised in acclaim.

Of the array of warriors who had crowded the rocky shelf a few moments

before only a tattered red cloak, a dark fist still clutching a spear were visible in the debris to give silent evidence of their fate.

"The Place of Power has destroyed Harg!" Memar exclaimed. Then, as no echo swelled his voice, "And in so doing lost its mighty force! The changing in the cliff's contour has stilled the echo!"

"Aye." Ulf nodded. "Great and terrible have been your deeds this day, Blind One! A city freed of the spell of fear, a tyrant and his followers swept to death, the very face of the precipice changed! More, you have given Ethu, all Targash, a new ruler! A queen!"

Zora's gaze shifted from the cheering throngs to the tall, muscular Northman at her side.

"Only a queen?" she whispered softly. "No more?"

Ulf studied the girl's vivid face and the blood leaped through his veins. Then from the east a puff of wind stirred, bearing a scent of strange blossoms, of fragrant spices; cool and haunting, it blew through Ulf's soul, whispering of the blue horizon, the adventure that lay beyond . . . always beyond . . .

"By Wotan!" The Northman breathed deeply. "Sweet is woman's voice, yet the call of far lands is sweeter! What palace could fail to be a prison to Ulf the Ganger? Follow your destiny, Queen of Targash, as I follow mine!"

"My destiny . . ." the girl whispered. Then, lifting her slight shoulders, she took Memar's arm, advanced toward the cheering throngs.

Ulf, leaning upon his sword, no longer saw their two figures; his gaze was on the snowy hills beyond. Majestic, awe-inspiring, they spoke of mystery, of new wonders. Tomorrow, when he had rested, he would follow the trail to the east . . .

GRUESOME HORROR NOVELETTE OF A NIGHTMARE GODDESS

FRESH FIANCÉS FOR THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER BY RUSSELL GRAY

Author of "House Where Evil Lived," etc.



And then he had the hot iron, and what he did to Portia would be nothing compared to this

The unholy lust, the unspeakable orgies, the hideous tortures would have sufficed to damn my soul—but this vampire luring me worshipped evil, enshrined it, until virtue was to be despised, and vileness was all I lived for!

CHAPTER ONE

THE GOLDEN TEMPTRESS

IT was the usual sort of literary party at which half the guests were uninvited. By midnight you didn't know whether the man drinking with you was a famous English author come to America to make war speeches or a crasher who wanted to rub shoulders with the famous. It didn't matter because by that time everybody was pretty drunk and nobody paid any attention to those who drifted in and out

of the apartment—until that woman suddenly appeared.

She was the kind who drew your eyes and held them and made you forget that there were other attractive women in the room. She wore a mink cape which dropped open in front so that you couldn't miss her high-bared breasts which pushed against the low bodice of a slinky gown. The gown was golden and so was her skin, and the way the material molded her body it wasn't easy to tell precisely what was skin and what gown.

She undulated over to the table where the drinks were served, and at

once men closed in around her, pouring for her.

Helen, my wife, and I Roland Cuyler, the Author, and his wife Clara were standing near a window in an attempt to get a breath of air. We had ceased our conversation when the woman had entered. All of us looked at her.

"Who's she?" Helen asked.

Roland Cuyler licked his lips and swallowed hard and said: "Never saw her before."

He was a bad liar. He'd become jittery as soon as he had been aware of her presence; looking at her a few minutes ago, some of the liquid had spilled from his cocktail glass. I wondered why he didn't tell the truth, then dismissed it from my mind. As his literary agent, it was my business to sell his novels, not to delve into his personal life.

Our little group at the window broke up. Helen moved away to talk to Portia Teele, whose love novels sold by the hundreds of thousands, and I found myself alone. But only for a moment. I turned and there was the woman in gold. A cocktail glass was raised to her lips, and above its rim I saw gray eyes, flecked with gold, calmly appraising me.

"You're Lester Marlin, the literary agent, aren't you?" she said. "I'm Tala Mag."

Curious name. And curious woman. She could have been called very beautiful if you liked them that way—exotic, with eyes slightly slanted and extremely long and narrow brows and high cheekbones, and a body so vibrant that each motion was a sensuous invitation. Not my type, however. I preferred the pure fresh young beauty of Helen.

Tala Mag dropped the glass from her lips and suddenly I realized that she was so close to me that her pointed breasts almost touched my chest. Over her left shoulder I saw Portia Teele and Helen staring at us. Helen smiled. She knew that a literary agent of my rep-

utation, who, by accepting to handle a writer's manuscript, practically assured its sale, was always being annoyed by women authors who tried to use their bodies as substitutes for lack of literary talent. This Tala Mag was probably one of those.

Tala Mag glanced over my shoulder and coldly studied Helen. Then she turned back to me and intimately tucked a hand through my arm and leaned against me so that I felt the soft yielding of a breast.

"Your wife appears jealous," she whispered.

Somebody must have told her who Helen was, and it was because my wife watched that she was trying to make me. What the hell was her game?

"Of course she's not," I told her. "Why should she be? She knows that no other woman could mean anything to me."

Her gold-flecked eyes looked up at me challengingly. "She is rather attractive."

I let her have it right where I knew it would hurt. "By far the most attractive woman in this room," I said.

I had expected her not to like the indirect insult, but I hadn't thought that such utter rage would flood her face. With a thin cry of fury she dropped my arm and stepped away from me. I smiled as I watched the indignant sway of her hips as she moved across the room. Helen was smiling also. We understood each other, my wife and I. That was why we were so incomparably happy together.

A COUPLE of minutes later Helen and I left the party. As we walked down the two flights of stairs to the street, Helen observed with that rippling laugh of hers: "Poor darling, having so many women after you. How do you bear up under it?"

"Easily, sweet. I think of you and then they appear like hags before my

eyes. This Tala Mag—that's her name—was so obviously wanton that she was funny."

And both of us laughed quietly, intimately, as if only we could understand the grand joke we shared.

Then suddenly our laughter died in our throats. We had turned the landing and there, with her back against the wall, stood Tala Mag. It was impossible for her not to have overheard us.

She said nothing but her expression told us plenty. I think that if she had had a weapon in her hand she would have killed us both on the spot. She drew her cape tighter about her. We passed quickly.

In the street Helen shuddered. "Did you see the way she looked at us?"

"Forget it, darling," I said. "There's nothing she can do about it."

By the time we had reached home, we had dismissed her from our minds.

The following morning there was a gold-tinted envelope in my mail, sent special delivery. It contained two notes. One, from Portia Teele, read:

Dear Les:
I've never before asked you to do me a personal favor. Tala Mag told me what occurred last night and feels that it was a misunderstanding on both your parts. She had no opportunity to tell you that she is a writer and would desire your assistance. I have read her manuscripts; she has a great deal of talent. Please see her for my sake.

PORȚIA.

The second note was heavily scented. It contained but a single line:

Dear Mr. Marlin:

Please come to my apartment at four this afternoon.

TALA MAG.

I was in something of a spot. I couldn't afford to antagonize Portia Teele who was my best client, and I didn't want to have anything to do with this Tala Mag. And why insist that I come to her apartment? The proper

procedure was for her to come to my office.

By the afternoon I had made up my mind to go, solely, I assured myself, because Portia Teele had asked me to. Yet in back of my mind was a vagrant desire to see this exotic Tala Mag again. Any way, what had I to be afraid of? I'd never had much trouble putting a demanding woman in her place.

I arrived there twenty after four, deliberately, to show her that I wasn't in the least anxious. She lived thirty stories above Park Avenue in a penthouse. Well, one thing was certain: she certainly wasn't an improverished struggling writer.

The biggest man I had ever seen admitted me. Not the tallest, although he must have been a least six-six, and not fat either, but simply built in a huge, powerful mold. He was, in addition, ugly as sin, with hardly anything in the way of a brow or a chin. I'm of average size and build, but he made me feel like a pygmy as he stepped aside to let me by.

TALA MAG came forward to receive me in the foyer, and she was wearing a spider-web blue negligee and a pair of blue mules and not another thing. A pleasing combination—blue against the rich gold of her skin, and there was plenty of skin showing, and the rest of it, voluptuously curved, shimmered under the negligee.

So! She was taking up where she had left off yesterday. As I followed her into the library, I determined to get out as soon as I could.

She said nothing about last night and made no attempt to come near me. She took a sheaf of typewritten pages from the desk and nodded toward a comfortable leather chair. I sat down and started to read. She retreated to the other end of the room and mixed high-balls. She handed one to me and then offered me a cigarette. As she applied

a match to my cigarette, she leaned over and her negligee fell away from her throat and there was no covering over her breasts. They were golden and rose-tipped and dangling with the bending of her torso. I dropped my eyes quickly to the manuscript.

A sensation of mingled horror and revulsion crept over me as I read. How can I describe the story she had written? It wasn't quite pornographic and yet it was more than that. There was not a sentence or a paragraph which standing alone, could be called obscene, yet the effect of the whole was incredibly vile. It concerned unholy lust and unspeakable orgies and hideous tortures, but it was chiefly the point of view that shocked my hard-boiled soul. She revelled in evilness, extolled it, until virtue was to be despised and vileness all that made living tolerable.

I went to the desk and tossed the papers down and turned to her. She was looking at me expectantly, with mouth half-open.

"You like it?"

I shrugged. "Put it this way: no publisher would touch it."

"But if you, with your reputation, took it to a publisher?"

"That won't help either," I said. "Sorry." I started to go.

She came to meet me, and somehow her negligee had fallen open and was trailing behind her. No doubt that she was startlingly attractive, but the only effect of her nudity on me was one of anger.

She caught my arm as I tried to pass her. "Mr. Marlin—Lester—you know that you are devilishly handsome."

I said tightly: "You're wasting your time." And I jerked my arm roughly away from her.

She ran around me so that she was in front of me again and threw her arms about my neck. I admit that as I tried to pull her off, pulses pounded in my

veins. The memory of Helen blurred with the furious agitation of her torso and thighs against me. But not sufficiently to make me succumb to her. Violently I tore her arms away from about my neck and, with an exclamation of rage, threw her to the floor.

She sat up, glaring up at me, her bared breasts rising and falling. When I was a step from the door, she called out: "Emil!" And a split-second later her servant's enormous body filled the doorway.

I was too angry to be afraid. I said in a voice that quivered: "Let me pass."

He stood there as solidly as a rock. And as if she were telling a dog to fetch something, she ordered: "Get him, Emil."

I stepped backward as he came at me with his great arms apart. Realizing that my only chance was an attack, I threw myself forward, plunging my right fist into his midriff. My knuckles felt as if they had struck corrugated iron.

And then his arms were around me, and I knew that I was through. I thrashed in his grip, but I might as well have tried to struggle in a steel vise. Slowly his arms tightened, constricting my ribs, my lungs. Breath choked up in me. The motion of my kicking legs grew feebler, then stopped altogether as, my face pressed against his massive sweaty chest, I sank into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER II

THE ROOM OF TORMENT

WHEN I opened my eyes, I found that iron chains, dangling from the ceiling, were fastened about each of my wrists. My feet just about touched the floor, so that I had to stand erect. My clothes had been taken from me; they lay

neatly piled on a chair nearby.

For dazed moments I thought that this must be a nightmare; that Tala Mag's huge servant must be a figment of my imagination; that perhaps even Tala Mag was only a dream of dark desire. And then I saw that I was still in the library where I had read her curiously vile manuscript. Furniture had been pushed from the center of the floor where I hung from the chains.

This was ridiculous, of course—to have something like this happen in a modern apartment house in the heart of the city. I took a deep breath and called for help at the top of my lungs.

Behind me somebody laughed. Twisting my head over my shoulder, I saw Tala Mag, still clad in that diaphanous blue negligee, coming toward me.

"It may interest you to know that this room is soundproof," she said.

My voice broke off. I was staring with bulging eyes at the murderous whip she held in her hand. Part of its black length wriggled like a live snake on the floor behind her.

"What are you going to do?" I demanded harshly.

"Teach you respect for Tala Mag," she said. "And break your stubborn spirit until you grovel at my feet."

I cursed her then, hoarsely, steadily, and I tore hopelessly at the chains, while she stood off a little way and watched me with a half-smile on her red lips and hellish lights dancing in her gray-and-gold eyes. Then she stepped toward me and ran a hand over my chest, letting her fingers drag so that the nails pierced and ripped skin.

"You are a handsome man, Lester Marlin," she said. "There is much that we can do together, you and I—startling ecstasies which we may attain. Forget that prosaic woman who is your wife. Say the word and I will have Emil remove the chains from you, and then you and I—"

The rest of her words were cut off by her agonized grunt as I brought my knee up into her stomach. She fell away from me and her face became a hideous mask. She straightened up and stepped around me and I tensed for the bit of the lash. When it came, curling around my back and cutting through skin and into flesh, it felt like a band of living fire encircling me. A cry of pain rose to my lips, but I choked it back, determined not to give her the satisfaction of hearing me scream.

I swung around from my wrists and kicked out at her again. But she was prepared now and jumped out of the way, and again the cruel lash snapped against my body.

I went through a queer frantic dance as I tried to get at her with my feet, but she was nimble and always just out of reach, moving slowly around me, her arm swinging back and forth as the agonizing leather thong kept curling about me. And so I ceased all effort to kick her because my gyrations added to her diabolical enjoyment and I hung there from the chains as the whip formed a mantle of anguish about me.

"Scream!" she panted.

But I would not give her that added pleasure. Blood trickled down from where my teeth sank into my lower lip.

"Scream!" And the whip cracked.

Her negligee fell open in front. Sweat glistened on her golden skin, trickled down between her heaving breasts, soaked through the material. Encumbered by the negligee, she savagely ripped it off and, naked, continued to apply the lash.

I must have hated her more than any man hated anybody to have the strength not to give voice to the agony which was trying to force screams past my lips.

Suddenly the lashing stopped. Through a mist of pain I saw her standing before me, her flesh twitching and quivering with terrific emotional exer-

tion. But the fury had gone out of her face and her eyes were suddenly soft.

SHE dropped the whip and came at me, throwing her arms about me and mashing herself against my anguish-torn body.

"You are the man for me," she whispered. "You have the proud, stubborn spirit. Love me and I will bathe your wounds and make you whole again and teach you such passion as you never dreamed existed."

It would have been simple then to submit, to possess this exotic creature and have done with unendurable anguish. But I knew that I could not. It had gone beyond mere physical faithfulness to Helen. It was a relentless struggle between good and evil; for my immortal soul, if you care to put it that way. If I gave in to her, I would always thereafter consider myself less than a man. Better to die of torture than to let her triumph over me.

Through swollen, bloody lips I said: "Go to hell!"

"You stubborn fool! Do you prefer to be cut to pieces?"

I tried to jab my knee into her again, but she was too close to me and I was too weak. She clung to me, digging her teeth into the side of my neck, and the whole weight of her body pulled down on my strained arm muscles. Then she slid away from me and picked up the whip.

"I won't kill you," she said in a voice that shook with fury. "Not yet. I would not accept you now if you came crawling to me. Before I am through with you, I shall make you suffer infinitely more than any whip can make you suffer."

And again I felt the hellish sting of the whip. She danced around me, applying the lash wherever the skin was still whole; and as through a shimmering veil of torment I saw her magnifi-

cent breasts bobbing and sweat form a sheen over her golden skin. After a while the mist grew thicker until I could no longer see her or the room or anything at all. But I could feel. Every quivering nerve throbbed under the whip which had become a white-hot rod of flame.

And yet I kept my voice locked within my throat. It was no longer physical effort which kept me from shrieking, for I had none of that left. It must have been something rooted deep in my subconscious which deprived her of her final triumph.

And then I sank into a world in which nothing existed but pain. . . .

Dawn was painting the city sky a dull gray above the East River when I awoke. I was propped up against a warehouse on South Street. Several men, going early to work, passed without so much as glancing at me, thinking, no doubt, that I was a drunken bum. I was again fully dressed. She had spared my face with her lash, and save for dried blood on my chin I looked more or less presentable.

When I tried to rise, bands of agony held me. I clenched my teeth and clawed myself erect along the side of the building. Each step was anguish. Finally I made my way to the curb and hung onto a lamppost until a taxi cab passed. I hailed it and flopped into the back seat and muttered my address on Washington Square.

When I reached my home, I told the taxi driver that I was sick and tipped him generously and he helped me up to my apartment. After considerable ringing, Helen came to the door in her sleeping pajamas. She took one look at my greenish, pain-twisted face and screamed and ran to me.

"Darling, what happened to you? I went to bed early, thinking that you were out late on business, and not until the bell rang just now did I realize

that you hadn't come home. Darling, you're sick!"

She led me into the bedroom where I dropped down on the bed. I did not tell her the truth; I had resolved not to tell anybody, especially not the police. This was strictly between Tala Mag and myself. And if any of this came out, the newspapers and the gossip columnists would have a field-day. I said that I had been walking along a dark street last night when I had been waylaid by a couple of men whose faces I had not been able to see and they had beaten me. I didn't know why, I said; perhaps I had inadvertently injured somebody and this was his or her revenge.

GENTLY Helen removed my clothes. And when she saw what the whip had done to my flesh, she cried out and went into a semi-hysterical fit of weeping. But she maintained enough self-control to call a doctor and bathe my wounds until he arrived.

For a week I lay in bed. I made Helen and the doctor promise to tell nobody, saying that I did not want the newspapers to get the story. And under Helen's tender care, I was soon as good as new save for certain parts where the lash had struck too many times and where I would forever have ridges on my skin.

When I had recovered, I obtained a permit to purchase a pistol, and then I went to pay a visit to Tala Mag. The pistol was for the huge servant Emil; Tala Mag I could handle with my bare hands.

From the building superintendent I learned that she had moved the day after my beating. She had left no forwarding address; he had no idea where she might have gone. I looked up Portia Teele, but she was out of town. Not even Sam Spaulding, her publisher, knew where Portia Teele could be found.

So there was nothing for me to do but bide my time. I was convinced that I had not seen the last of her. She had told me, in the fury of her hatred at my refusal to submit, that she had a worse fate in store for me than the whipping. Well, this time I would be prepared for her.

CHAPTER III

INVITATION TO DEATH

ONE morning I received a letter from Roland Cuyler, the author:

Dear Les:

A friend of mine, who has gone on a journey, has been good enough to allow me the use of his charming upstate place until he returns. I've been staying here with Clara and working my head off. I've completed my novel, and rather than send it down to you, how about you and Helen driving up here to spend a weekend or longer with us?

It's an ideal place—swimming and tennis, and only a three hour drive from the city. Don't bother to reply. I'm assuming that you and Helen will arrive some time Saturday.

It sounded good. The city was in the grip of one of those heat waves which made New York unbearable. When I told Helen about it, she was enthusiastic.

So that Saturday afternoon we started out in my car. After three hours we found ourselves in a rather wild and isolated valley. Following the directions which Cuyler had enclosed, we turned off to a dirt road which ran through a deep woods and was only wide enough for one car. Seven miles of bumping over ruts brought us there.

Frankly, the place surprised us. We had expected a fairly sumptuous cottage at the most, but this looked like a

vast estate in the heart of the woods. A seven-foot fieldstone fence enclosed it entirely.

I drove up to the twin massive solid iron doors and got out of the car. There was a telephone on the wall. I lifted the receiver and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Your name, please?" a man's voice asked.

I told him, then returned to the car. The two doors swung open.

"Pretty swanky," Helen commented as I drove through. The doors closed behind us. And thirty feet ahead of us, to our astonishment, was another stone wall, this one at least four feet higher than the first and rimmed for a couple of feet more with barbed-wire. A second pair of doors swung open at our approach.

Helen frowned uneasily. "This place looks like a fortress."

"Millionaires go in for this sort of thing," I said. "Probably there are armed guards about the place also. The rich are always afraid of kidnappings and intrusions on their privacy. The Cuylers certainly fell into something soft."

The second pair of doors also shut behind us. As we drove along the gravel road toward the large stone house, I noticed that the grounds had been allowed to run pretty much to seed. The lawns which must once have been velvet smooth, were overgrown and the flower gardens were a chaos. We passed a tennis court which evidently hadn't been cared for in years and then a swimming pool which was absolutely dry.

Queer. Was this what Cuyler had raved about? And where was everybody? No sign of guards or servants. Both doors had been opened by unseen electrical control.

Helen shifted closer to me. "This place gives me the creeps, Les."

"They're probably all in the house,"

I said. "Ah, look, there are a number of parked cars, and there's somebody on the side terrace."

I stopped the car behind four or five others and Helen and I got out and walked to the stone terrace. Frank Bord, the publisher, and his exquisite little wife, Lillian, were lounging on easy chairs and sipping drinks.

BORD waved a hand toward us. "Hi, folks. So it's going to be a party after all. The Rooneys are somewhere inside. Haven't seen hide or hair of anybody else save a moody servant named Si who brought us drinks."

"Where are the Cuylers?" I asked.

"Search me. All we could get out of the servant was that they'd be down eventually. Hell of a way to receive guests. Look for Si and you can get some drinks."

Helen and I passed into the house. We found ourselves in an enormous drawing room. Sitting on a couch at the farther side were Victor Rooney, the Broadway producer, and Jane, his wife, a charming redhead.

As we entered, Jane was saying: "I don't like it. There's an atmosphere about this place which—well, makes me uncomfortable. There seems to be only one servant in this huge place and the Cuylers don't seem to be about and we haven't even been shown to our rooms."

Victor Rooney saw us and stood up. "Greetings, folks. Looks like a gathering of the clan. Guess Roland wants us all in on the reading of his new book." He raised his voice. "Hey, Si! Drinks for four."

Several minutes later a squat man with shoulders the width of a barn door came in with a tray on which were four cocktail glasses. If the servant had mixed the drinks himself, he could have made a fortune as a bartender. It was the smoothest liquor I had ever tasted and had a curiously exotic flavor.

By the time we had finished the

drinks, we heard another car pull up. The four of us went out to the terrace and joined the Bords. The latest arrivals were Bob and Inez Spaulding. He was also a producer, a friendly rival to Frank Bord. His wife had been a former showgirl—a statuesque blonde who made up in figure what she lacked in brains.

We called for eight more cocktails from Si and stood about drinking and raking the Cuylers over the coals for not having come down to receive us.

"Damn them, I'm going up to find them," Bord announced.

"Let's all go," Inez Spaulding put in.

We started into the house. And as we entered the drawing room, we saw Roland and Clara Cuyler coming toward us.

"It's about time you two paid some attention to us," Victor Rooney growled.

Suddenly we all stopped dead, staring at Roland and Clara Cuyler. Something had happened to them—to their faces which seemed to have become lined and flabby with age within a couple of weeks; to their bodies which drooped in attitudes of utter hopelessness. And they stopped also and moved close together, each holding to the other as if in that way they found the courage necessary to face us.

"I couldn't help it," Roland Cuyler muttered across the room to us in a weak voice. "She made me write those letters to you and invite you to this hell. I held out as long as I could, but she—"

"Whom are you talking about?" I demanded, feeling my heart turn to stone.

"Haven't you guessed?" a voice said softly.

"Yes, I had guessed at Cuyler's first words; and now, turning my head toward another door at the side of the room, I saw that my worst fears were justified.

Tala Mag stood just inside of the doorway, a self-satisfied smile playing on her red lips. Her gold-flecked eyes glowed with an exalted sense of victory. She moved toward us a few steps, and her body was a glorious blue-and-gold flame. She was clad in a blue evening gown which was spun of incredibly delicate silk so that it covered her without hiding her voluptuously curved flesh.

I felt the pressure of Helen's hand tightening on my arm. We all stared at Tala Mag with a kind of dreadful fascination, and I realized, somehow, that all the other men in the room had met her, and had had some sort of unpleasant experience with her.

TALA MAG laughed. "I have told each of you men that you shall see me again. I am not one to be spurned or insulted. You, Frank Bord, would not publish my manuscript and called me vile names. You, Bob Spaulding, read my manuscript and returned it with a nasty note and then absolutely refused to see me. Victor Rooney, you would not produce a play of mine and, when I offered myself to you, took me and then spurned me. Lester Marlin, you I hate with all the depth of my being. Indeed, I hate and despise all of you and your pretty, vapid wives."

I had resolved that the next time I saw her I would beat her within an inch of her life. But I found a great weakness stealing over me which kept me rooted to the spot. Not a physical weakness so much as something insidious inside of me which robbed me of the power of action. It was fear for what this creature of hell might do to Helen, and at the same time it was something else. Through my mind flickered the thought that the cocktails I had drunk might have been drugged. That must have been it, in part, because like myself none of the others uttered a word or made a movement. We stood bunched like statues.

Tala Mag was speaking again. "Tell them, Roland Cuyler, how completely they are in my power."

Cuyler shuddered. "You cannot escape. There are two walls, neither of which can be surmounted. And then those terrible servants. Believe me, I didn't want to lure you here. But she would have found another way and—and they whipped Clara."

Clara Cuyler moaned and swayed against her husband. She was wearing a sleeveless dress, and sunlight, streaming through a window, glinted on a bare white shoulder, and I saw an ugly welt, like a ragged finger, mar her flesh and disappear under the dress.

The sight of that whip mark brought vividly home to me the torment I myself had suffered and what mercy Helen and I and the others could expect from Tala Mag; and I snapped out of my trance and hurled myself at her. My hands were on her at the moment when she cried out. My fingers closed about her throat. I felt her body thrash against me; I saw her gray eyes almost pop from their sockets as I bore her down to the floor. And all about me voices screamed in fear and horror, but I ignored them, conscious only that I could save Helen from hell only by ridding the world of this creature.

Suddenly my fingers were torn away from Tala Mag's throat, and I was plucked off her as if I were a child in a strong man's grip. I was lifted high in the air and tossed down to the hard floor. Stunned, I lay there, trying to clear the fog from my brain.

The screams went on. Painfully I sat up and looked about at a nightmare scene.

Emil, Tala Mag's huge servant, had torn me away from his mistress, and there were three other men in the room, as big as Emil or nearly as strong. One was Si, the squat servant who had brought us the drinks, and his massive shoulders gave him the power of Emil.

And there were two others, hulking brutes, against whom our average human strength was puny.

THREE of the servants were each holding Bord and Spaulding and Rooney, while the fourth had a whip in his hand with which he kept our four wives in a screaming huddle in a corner of the room. Tala Mag had risen to her feet and was holding her throat where my fingers had bruised her and her body trembled with excitement. Roland Cuyler offered no resistance; he stood holding his wife to his chest, both their spirits utterly broken.

I bounded to my feet and hurled myself at Si, who was holding Bob Spaulding. My fist drove into his face. The blow hadn't the slightest effect. He dropped Spaulding, whom he had knocked unconscious, and turned to me. He crushed me in a bear's hug, pinning my arms to my side, and he lifted my thrashing body and carried me into another room. There he shoved me against a wall and held me with one hand in spite of my most violent struggles, while with his free hand he fumbled with something. I heard the rattling of chains, felt gyves snap about my wrists. He left me there more helpless in the chains than ever I had been in his tremendous grip.

I noticed then that I was in a bare stone room. On either side of me other chains were imbedded in the wall. One by one the other men were brought in and their wrists were fastened to chains. Even Roland Cuyler who had no resistance left in him.

When we were all chained, our wives were driven in by the servant who had the whip. I cried out when I saw the murderous tip bite into Helen's back as she stumbled; futilely I tore at the chains. Then the five women cowered moaning against the wall on the opposite side of us, not making a motion for fear of the whip.

"Les!" Helen wailed. "Oh, God, Lester!"

And terror tore from the throat of each woman the name of her husband, and none of us men could do anything to help them.

Tala Mag entered the room. Triumphantly she ran her eyes over all of us and laughed. In my despair I saw a fragmentary hope to save Helen and the others.

"Tala!" I cried. "You wanted me once. Let them go and I will be your slave."

Her lips curled. "You are too late by several weeks, Lester Marlin. I could have loved you more than any man was ever loved. Now I hate you." She turned to one of the servants. "Wick, bring in Portia Teele."

There was an interval of suspense, during which the wailing of the women continued and the groan of the men. And then Portia Teele, the writer of sentimental love stories, was led into the room by the servant called Wick.

She was a plump woman, past the bloom of youth. She stopped in her tracks when she saw us and a moan passed her lips. Wick closed a big hand over the back of her neck and thrust her forward so that she came stumbling to the center of the room.

Tala Mag stood there waiting for her. Portia fell on her knees before her and clawed at her dress.

"Tala, for God's sake, haven't I always been your friend?"

"Friend!" Tala Mag sneered. "Yes, you helped me with my literary style, but would you publish my masterpiece under your name?"

"I couldn't, Tala. My reputation."

"Let the fact that your reputation remains unblemished console you now," Tala Mag chortled. "Clops, attend to her."

THE fourth servant lifted Portia. Wick stretched a hand toward the

ceiling and pulled down two chains on pulleys, like those to which I had been fastened in Tala Mag's library. Portia shrieked wildly as she struggled in that powerful grip. Wick secured her wrists to the chains and pulled a rope over the pulleys, lifting Portia's writhing body from the floor. And she hung there, her face frightful with terror, her eyes pools of impending madness.

"Tala!" she shrilled. "In the name of heaven! I'll do anything you ask."

Tala Mag shrugged her bare shoulders. "The time for mercy is past. Besides, my dear Portia, I require somebody to be made an example of for my other guests, and you have been selected."

I knew then that her statement that she hated us because we had not helped her advance her literary career was a lie. She hadn't cared about that at all. Her manuscript, at least where I was concerned, had been simply an excuse to thrust herself at me. Her literary pretensions had been simply an act to inculcate in herself hatred for us. Because she wanted to hate and find expression for hatred. Something sub-human and diabolical in her demanded that it be sated by the torment of others.

She stepped to where Portia Teele hung. "You are about to experience sensations which are denied to most of us. For long, long minutes you are going to live as fully as any person has ever lived, with every nerve quivering and throbbing, every atom of your being fully alive."

And with her own hands she ripped the clothing from Portia Teele. Then she stooped and pulled off Portia's shoes and stockings, and Portia hung naked from the chains, sobbing and shrieking and writhing.

"All right, Clops," Tala Mag said.

All heads turned to the door through which the giant Clops was coming. Before him he wheeled a brazier in which irons glowed white-hot in burning coals.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER

IT is said that there is no pain as great as the pain inflicted by fire. Seeing how Portia Teele suffered, I can believe that. The whipping I had received from Tala Mag was nothing compared to what the servant Clops did to Portia with those hot irons.

We all turned our eyes away, of course, and our wives sank to the floor and buried their faces in their arms, but we couldn't shut out her inhuman screams. Some of us had to look now and then, as if invisible wires drew our gazes.

After a while one of her large breasts melted away under the iron as if it had been ice. There was no blood, for the heat cauterized as it burned. Clops shifted the iron to a fresh spot; momentarily it sizzled as it touched the clammy perspiration covering agonized flesh. Then the stench of burning flesh grew heavier.

And Tala Mag watched intently with bosom heaving and nerves twitching under her high cheekbones, her stare missing no detail of the torture.

Minutes or hours may have passed before the screams stopped. Horror drags time out to its utmost. But I do know that night had fallen when Clops wheeled the brazier to a corner of the room.

The thing dangling from the chains was no longer a woman. Its skin had been replaced by a mantle of smoldering scar tissue. The head hung forward with long hair cascading over fattened chest where breasts had been. Nausea churned in all of us.

I glanced across at Helen and saw that she had mercifully fainted. So had two of the other women, but they were not permitted that method of escape. One of the servants threw

water on them, reviving them.

What now? What new hellishness would the degenerate mind of that she-fiend conceive? Would she serve Helen and the other women the same way as she had Portia Teele? God!

There was a sudden silence as Tala Mag started to speak. Even the women ceased moaning, for it was plain that she was to announce the fate of the rest of us. She stood next to that dangling horror, and she was tall and beautiful in that blue evening gown that revealed more of her golden-skinned body than no clothes at all would have.

"You have seen how this foolish woman suffered," she said. "You realize that at a word from me each of the other five women will share her experience and worse." A cry went up from our wives. Tala Mag lifted a hand and continued: "But I am magnanimous. I shall spare you on one condition—that you follow to the letter every command I utter. If you refuse—" She waved significantly to the dangling corpse.

We all held our breaths, knowing that whatever she would propose would be more fiendish than what had been done to Portia Teele, yet daring to hope that somehow what passed for her heart had been softened.

"Clara Cuyler, come to the center of the room," Tala Mag ordered.

As if in a dream, Clara rose and moved away from the group of women. Her face was ugly with fear.

"Remove your clothing."

"No!" Clara screeched. "Please!"

"You will follow my order without protest."

Clara glanced at the hideous corpse and began frantically to undress. Clara had been selected first because she had been longest under the domination of Tala Mag and feared her most. Her husband sobbed like a child. When she was utterly nude, she was allowed to return to the other women. I saw now

the cruel whip marks which criss-crossed her white skin.

"Helen Marlin," Tala Mag called. "Come here and strip."

I ground my teeth with helplessness. One by one she would make each woman undress before her four servants and four other strangers while the woman's husband was forced to look on. And that would be only the beginning.

THE modesty in Helen's nature dominated the fear which must have gibbered within her. She stood up, straight and proud and defiant, but did not come forward.

"I refuse," my wife declared firmly.

Tala laughed with glee. "The same stubborn streak as your husband, I see. Well, it will be all the more fun breaking you. You realize that you will be stripped anyway—not only of your clothing but of your skin as well. . . . Clops, the brazier. Emil, put her in the chains."

Helen chewed on her knuckles as she saw Clops start wheeling the brazier from its corner and Emil advancing toward her. A whimper trickled from her throat, rising higher and higher. As for me, I was shouting something, but I cannot remember what it was. Perhaps I was cursing Tala Mag; perhaps urging Helen to give in rather than suffer the inevitable torment of fire.

When Emil actually had his hands on her and was dragging her forward, Helen cracked. The memory of what Portia Teele had endured was still too vivid in her mind to make resistance possible.

"I'll do it!" she cried. "Please tell him to let me go."

God, if I could have strangled Tala Mag then and there for the smug smile on her lips as she told Emil to release my wife! The giant stepped away and Helen was left alone on the floor with all eyes in the room on her.

Slowly, as if her hands were obeying

a will divorced from her own, Helen pulled down the zipper in the side of her dress and drew the dress over her head. It fluttered to the floor. Momentarily she hesitated as she stood clad only in strips of silk about hips and breasts; then her hands went behind her back to the snaps of her brassiere. She removed it and it followed her dress to the floor and, her entire body suffused with pink, she cupped her palms over her splendid bared breasts.

"Continue," Tala Mag said.

Helen tugged at the elastic of her step-ins, changed her mind and kicked off her shoes instead. Bending over, she rolled down her stockings and straightened up again, her arms once more coming up to cover her breasts. Choking whimpers of shame came from her lips.

The four mighty servants of Tala Mag had carnal eyes fixed on my wife and their ugly features were slack with degenerate lust. And even the husbands of the four other women became suddenly quiet as they stared avidly at her.

"I said strip completely," Tala Mag rasped.

And so Helen had to remove the last wisp of silk from her hips, and that too joined the rest of her garments. Completely naked she stood there, while four sub-human creatures and four other men feasted their eyes on her loveliness which had never before been exposed to any man's gaze but mine. She was truly magnificent as she stood there, with pride returning to her; and she faced Tala Mag defiantly, knowing that however beautiful Tala Mag might be, it faded before the beauty of her own body. And Tala Mag knew that also and venom twisted her face.

"You may return," Tala Mag ordered savagely. "Next, Lillian Bord."

One by one the three remaining women came to the center of the room and, thoroughly cowered, removed

their clothing. When they were all naked, Tala Mag looked the crouching women over coldly and said:

"Before the night is over, one of you five will endure the same fate as Portia Teele. Which one that will be depends on your husbands."

THE women were wailing again, their eyes drawn against their wills to where the thing that had been Portia Teele still hung from the chains. Which one was it to be? She had said that it depended on us men. Would she make us draw lots? No, her diabolical brain would think of something infinitely more horrible.

Tala Mag turned to us. "We shall have a hunt," she said with that completely dissolute smile of hers. "It will be great fun, I promise you. You men will be the hunters, your wives the hunted. The women will be let loose in the grounds, and then you men will be given guns. Not real guns, of course, shooting lead bullets; they will contain tiny pellets which will dissolve when striking the naked skin, leaving a blue mark. The game will last for two hours. At the end of that time you will all be rounded up and the blue marks on the bodies of the women will be counted, and she who has been hit the most times will be handed over to Clops for the caress of his hot irons."

We gaped at her, finding it hard to understand that even this woman could have conceived of anything so diabolical.

"It will be a fascinating game," she went on. "Those of you who win, and there will be only one loser, will be permitted to depart unharmed."

"We won't do it!" Victor Rooney shouted. "You can't make us!"

Tala Mag shrugged. "That is entirely up to you. You are all completely in my power, yet I am making a magnanimous gesture by promising freedom to all five of you men and four of

the women. If all of you prefer to die unpleasantly instead, very well. But I think that you will all play the game with no further protest."

What could we do? It was all our lives or the life of only one. We had no choice.

"As in all games, there are rules in this one," Tala Mag said. "You women, you hunted, will use all your skill, all your ingenuity, out there in the grounds to avoid being shot by the hunters. Not for a moment will you forget the terrible price you will have to pay if you are shot more times than the others. And you men, you will do your best to shoot and hit any woman but your wife, because the more times the others are hit, the greater chance your own wife will have of bearing the fewest marks on her skin. There will be but one bullet in your pistol; when you have shot that, you will return to the terrace where I will hand you another. We must play fair, gentlemen; if I gave you a supply of bullets in advance, you might be unsporting enough to hold a woman and fire repeatedly at her. You must realize that it will be futile to attempt to escape over the walls. One more rule: you may not attempt to protect your own wife from the others. My servants will be everywhere with flashlights, and there will be severe penalties for unsportsmanship."

Almost it was funny, her talk of sportsmanship. It was when she had finished speaking that the full diabolical cunning of the "game" became clear. Each of us men would have to do our best to condemn one of the other women to appalling torture in order to save his own wife.

"We are ready," Tala Mag announced. "You women hide yourselves well before we release the men. You know what is at stake."

They did not move. They crouched there against the wall in a frozen mass of naked flesh. One of the servants

went to them with a whip, and then, shrieking, they leaped to their feet and scampered across the room.

WE were released from our chains and led out to the terrace. We moved with slow, shambling steps, with our eyes fixed on the floor, not one of us looking at the others whose wives each of us would hunt like wild beasts in order to save the woman we loved. And although we were no longer in chains, we made no attempt at resistance, because we knew that our strength was that of babies as compared to that of the monstrous servants. We needed our energy—for the hunt.

A full moon hung above the estate, so that we could see the waterless pool and the overgrown lawn and the hedges and the trees and sections of the wall topped with barbed-wire. On a table on the terrace lay five toy-like pistols. One was handed to each of us. It was like a child's BB gun, with a small hole on top of the barrel where the pellets were inserted. Tala Mag seated herself at the table. At her right hand was a cardboard box filled with tiny blue pellets, the size of a BB shot. She gave one to each of us and we loaded our pistols and were ready.

Across the track of the moon a white figure ran. Moonbeams flashed on blonde hair and Bob Spaulding cried out, calling frantically to his wife to hide herself. She threw a glance at us over her shoulder, then stumbled among some trees. There was silence out there now and no sight of any of the five women.

"Go," Tala Mag said.

And we five hunters of naked women set out.



CHAPTER V

HUNT OF THE DAMNED

AM certain that the drinks we had several hours before must have been drugged. However much our minds had been affected by the sight of Portia Teele's horrible fate and fear of the giant servants and the frenzied urgency to keep our wives from frightful torment, all of that would not have been sufficient to make of us the relentless savage hunters which we became. Yes, it must have been drugs which stripped of us the last veneer of civilization. Without mercy we hunted the wives of our friends, the little pellets in our guns crueler in the end than leaden bullets would have been.

We set out when Tala Mag gave the command. It struck me that most of the women would have run around to the other side of the house. And as soon as I turned the corner, I glimpsed moonbeams dancing on a white arm. The rest of the body was hidden behind a rose bush.

Swiftly I ran up to the bush. When I had almost reached it, the woman behind the bush uttered a terrified cry and leaped to her feet. I saw the blond hair of Inez Spaulding. She put out her hands as if to ward off the pellet. Deliberately I shot at the smooth expanse of her abdomen.

She screamed shrilly then and fell to the ground, writhing and clawing at the blue spot which had appeared on her white skin. God, the pellets consisted of acid which burned the skin! Even those four women who would, in the end, be spared the torture of the white-hot irons, would still suffer untold agony from numerous acid burns.

Feet pounded behind me. Victor Rooney came up, gawked for a moment at Inez Spaulding, then bent close to

her and shot a pellet against her thigh. Her screams rose higher. In spite of her pain, she bounded up and stumbled off.

I had said we were not quite human. We raced back to the terrace to get more pellets to inflict more pain on other men's wives. As I inserted a pellet Tala Mag handed me into my pistol, I heard a shriek from the swimming pool. Whirling, I saw that a naked woman had fallen or jumped over the side and she was crouching there on the dry bottom, trapped, while Spaulding and Cuyler were taking aim at her.

The woman was Helen.

Shrilly I cursed those two men, although a minute before I had shot at Spaulding's wife as he was now shooting at mine. They both shot and Helen's body leaped erect, spun, and then she was trying to clamber over the side, her voice hoarse with pain. Rooney had reloaded his pistol and was racing toward where she was trying to climb out. Thinking only that Helen must not be hit again, I threw myself at his feet, and we went down together.

The next moment fire burned across my back. One of the servants stood over me, lashing me with a whip.

He let up at last and I lay there in a welter of anguish. Helen was no longer in the dry swimming pool. None of the men and women were in sight, but from other parts of the grounds I could hear screams.

"I mentioned sportsmanship," Tala Mag's voice came from behind me. "I trust you have learned your lesson."

I managed to push myself up to my feet. Bord and Cuyler were coming around the side of the house. They snatched pellets from Tala Mag and dashed off again. I had to go on, to inflict pain on other women so that Helen could be saved.

I became crafty—a hunter. Instead of rushing about wildly, I chose what

appeared to be the best hiding places and went to them. In a copse of birch trees I came across Jane Rooney and let her have it. I ran back to reload and returned to the hunt. I got Clara Cuyler and then Inez Spaulding. I had Lillian Bord trapped against a corner of the wall when her husband appeared suddenly and threw himself at me.

As we struggled there in the moonlight, a sharp beam of light spread over us and one of the servants pulled us apart. Now it was Frank Bord who received a lashing. Lillian had fled. I rose and went in search of a fresh victim.

Time lost all meaning. Two hours the hunt was to last, and five minutes or an hour might have passed. The night air was shattered by the occasional shrieks of the women; and now and then across my vision would flash a naked running woman, or a clothed man in pursuit or returning to the terrace to reload, or a huge servant with whip in one hand and flashlight in the other to impose "sportsmanship" on us.

Running across what had been a lawn, I almost stumbled over a white body which lay pressed flat, hidden in the tall grass. The woman leaped to her feet with breasts bobbing crazily and flesh quivering as she realized that she could not escape and waited with shrinking body for the searing pain of the acid pellet.

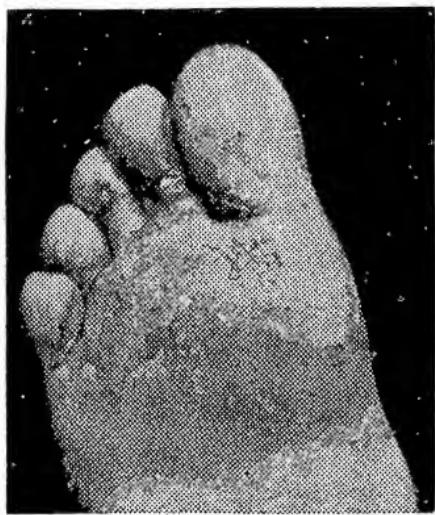
I lifted my pistol. Then for the first time I saw her face and my arm dropped to my side.

"Helen!"

She stumbled to me and my arms closed about the sweet, abused body of my wife.

"Helen, perhaps we can get out of here or hide before it's all over. Let's try to get into the house. They'll never think of looking there for us."

We ran across the lawn. We had almost reached the rear of the house



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when the form of Roland Cuyler came running toward us.

"Let him shoot you," I whispered. "We mustn't become separated again, and if I try to stop him they'll tear us apart."

She nodded and waited for him, setting her teeth. I swung a short distance away from her. In spite of the blue marks which pitted her skin, she looked breathtakingly lovely as she stood there in the moonlight. Cuyler came up to her, and glanced at me, then went close to her so that he would not miss. His lips were pressed tightly together and his eyes glinted with the joy of the hunter who had cornered his quarry. He was no longer quite human, and neither were the rest of us.

He shot a pellet at her sleek hip and raced off. Helen winced, but did not cry out. Then we were holding each other's hands again and continuing toward the house.

The sight of the windows shattered my scheme. They were all barred. Doubtless the front door was locked. There had to be another way. I had counted the blue acid marks on her and there seemed to be eight or ten. And the hunt was still young.

"Perhaps the wall," I said desperately. "I might be able to lift you to the top. The barbed-wire will tear you, but it will be no worse than the pellets and what might follow. Somehow you might manage to get over the second wall."

We ran across to the wall. For a while we were in the open and she was seen by Rooney, so we had to stop while she submitted to being shot again. I went through a hell of helplessness watching. Then we were at the wall.

I had hoped that there might be a tree close enough, but Tala Mag had taken care of that. Sticking my pistol in my belt, I pressed against the wall while Helen climbed up to my shoulders. She could just about reach the

top of the wall with her fingers. I grasped her ankles and, exerting every ounce of strength, lifted her slowly. She got her elbows on the wall, was pulling herself up—

A flashlight beam covered us. With a groan of despair I knew that I had failed. The whip curled around my back. I stumbled and Helen lost her hold and we both dropped to the ground. Panting under the pressure of Helen's soft body, I lay waiting for the whipping.

But what happened then was worse than any whipping would have been. The servant Wick dropped his whip and flashlight and plucked Helen from the ground. Holding her with one hand, he pulled from a pocket a pistol containing a number of the acid pellets, and five times he shot at various parts of Helen's body.

HER screams of agony formed a mad-denning din in my brain. This was our punishment for attempting to escape. Not only did the five pellets at once cause her unendurable anguish, but, counting the two other marks she might have avoided if she had not met me, she was seven marks behind the others. God, what a fool I had been! She had had one chance in five of losing. Now her handicap was terrific.

She writhed there on the ground, clawing at her flesh, and her screams attracted other hunters.

"Run!" I shouted.

With an effort she managed to stumble to her feet and choke off her voice. She cast a frantic glance over her shoulder and plunged in among a nearby copse. Frank Bord and Bob Spaulding raced after her.

Wick picked up his whip and flashlight and strode off. It struck me that I was wasting valuable time, that the only way to make up for those marks on Helen was to redouble my own efforts. And so I became a hunter again.

Several times more I came across Helen, and each time I kept my distance. With despairing heart I saw that her skin was literally pitted with those cruel, damning marks.

And so the nightmare continued. Running to the terrace to reload, shooting the pellet at a naked body, returning to the terrace. And always Tala Mag was behind that table, holding out the pellets one by one, that unholy smug smile fastened to her lips. Sometimes none of her servants was near, and it did not occur to me or to any of the others to strangle her then and there. We were too thoroughly cowed; too thoroughly savages intent only upon the hellish hunt.

Toward the end the five of us were so exhausted that we could scarcely stumble along, and our wives were weaker still, so that they made hardly any effort at flight any more.

Finally, after the passing of an eternity, the two hours were up. When we came to reload, two of the servants were waiting for us. We were taken into the chamber where Portia Teele had been tortured, and we were chained once again. The corpse had been removed.

Next the women were rounded up. They entered the room on legs which could scarcely bear them up, and they flopped on the bare floor and lay there, their bodies twitching with pain.

Then one by one they were dragged to the center of the floor and the blue marks on their skin were counted by Tala Mag while Emil kept a record. We men dared hardly breathe. Looking at Helen, my heart stopped within me. She seemed to have marks more than any of the others.

She was the third to be counted, after Clara Cuyler and Jane Rooney. Yes, she had many more than the others. And then Lillian Bord, and Helen was still the first.

Clops was at the brazier, blowing on the coals to heat the irons.



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CHAPTER VI
PASSION IN HELL

INEZ SPAULDING saved Helen's life. Because she had two more of the tiny blue acid dots on her skin than Helen, it was she who was suspended by her wrists from the ceiling.

I leaned back against the wall, feeling like a wrung out rag. Bob Spaulding went stark raving mad, and his shrieks as he tore against his chains mingled with those of his wife. Helen sat on the floor with head buried in her arms, shoulders quaking.

The brazier was wheeled from its corner by Clops. Inez watched him with eyes which were no longer those of a human being. Tala Mag placed a hand on Inez' quivering flesh and whispered words to her which I could not hear, but I knew by the sadistic light in her face that she was taunting the poor girl, telling her in detail which she was soon to endure.

Then Tala Mag stepped back and Clops set to work with the glowing irons.

It was a repetition of what happened to Portia Teele. For a long time Inez' statuesque body jerked in midair like a marionette and her screams rasped against our eardrums. Then little by little the screams turned to moans and

her body grew still save for involuntary spasms which shook it. The acrid smell of burning flesh clogged our nostrils.

It was over at last, and what hung from the chains was a grotesque caricature of Inez Spaulding.

Frank Bord's voice came weakly: "And now, for God's sake, let us go. You promised."

Tala Mag faced him and laughed. "Soon," she said, "You will have to be patient."

It was odd that it had occurred to none of us until that moment that Tala Mag could not keep her word to us—even if she had wanted to. The drugs, perhaps, and the mental tension under which we had been, had obscured the fact that our release would send the police of the nation after her and her servants. She did not have to take that risk.

So that hideous degrading hunt had been in vain!

Despair clouded our faces. We were helpless to do anything but wait for whatever fate Tala Mag announced.

Tala Mag gestured to Emil. He released me from the chains. Was I the next to be tortured? It did not matter, greatly. I was beyond caring.

Holding my arm, Emil dragged me up a flight of stairs and into a bedroom. In a dresser mirror I saw myself for the first time since I had entered the estate. My eyes were wild, my face grimy, and my shirt, ripped by whips and bushes, hung in tatters from my shoulders.

A minute later Tala Mag entered. She stood regarding me critically, with a strange excitement in her face and her practically bared breasts panting.

She said: "You are still very handsome, Lester Marlin. You shall be my lover, and after that you and your wife may leave. Emil will be outside the door, so do not attempt violence. And I may add that if you touch me, that if you attempt to harm me in any way

while we are alone, your wife will suffer ten times the agony of those two other women. . . . Emil, you may go."

WE were alone then, that creature of hell and myself. I looked at her provocative, voluptuous body in that blue gown which did not hide it from my gaze. Many a man would have given his soul to possess her, but my hatred of her made her repulsive in my eyes.

I went to her, saying: "You promise we shall be released—after?"

"I promise," she said, moving into my embrace.

I had to restrain myself to laugh the lie back into her face. I brought my mouth down to her red lips, and she was vibrant against me. For a moment she stepped away from me; the blue gown fluttered to the floor. I swung her nude body up in my arms and bore her to the bed while she moaned words of passion into my ear. I fondled her golden flesh, my hands moving up her body. She lay purring with ecstasy. My fingers reached her throat, caressing—then tightened.

She made the mistake of believing that threats of torturing my wife could any longer affect me. Threats can be effective only if there is a choice. Whatever I did or did not do, Helen and I would die. Perhaps we could expect a quicker or more merciful death from her monstrous servants than from her.

She writhed under me and her fingers clawed up at my face. Grimly I held on until her struggles ceased. But I did not quite kill her. A ray of hope flickered across my mind—a plan.

When she was unconscious I ripped a bed sheet into strips and tied her hands and feet and crammed a gag into her mouth.

Silently I moved to the door. There was no lock. Listening against the panel, I could not hear Emil. I ven-

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tured to open the door several inches and peered down the hall. No sight of anybody.

A woman cried out hoarsely. Not downstairs in the torture chamber, but in one of the rooms along the hall. And then I knew. Four naked women down there, guarded by four monsters! Without Tala Mag there to hold them back, the result was inevitable. That was why Emil had for once disobeyed her orders.

I shut the door and returned to the bed. As I thought of Helen in the embrace of one of those hideous servants, I went frantic with impatience. But I had to take my time if I wanted to save Helen and the others at all.

In my pocket I found a couple of matchbooks and a package of crumpled cigarettes. I lit a cigarette, then went into the adjoining bathroom and got water and revived Tala Mag. She glared up at me with all the fury of hell.

I sat down on the bed. "Listen," I said. "Somewhere in this house there must be weapons. Perhaps also an extra key to the chains downstairs. You will tell me where they are."

Her eyes were contemptuous.

I puffed on the cigaret and then crushed the lighted tip against her abdomen. Her torso arched and fell back on the bed. I lit another cigaret and kept the match alive, letting the tiny flame trail between her heaving breasts. And when that match died, I lit others, and I also kept a cigaret constantly glowing.

I had not thought that I could so calmly torture any woman, no matter how evil she may be; but she had made me into a creature akin to herself, and Helen's life, and more than her life, was at stake.

THE contempt in her face gave way to fear—and pain. She squirmed and thrashed on the bed, but could not

escape the steady torment of the matches and cigaret tips. And at last she indicated that she was ready to talk.

I kept one hand about her throat while with the other I removed the gag. Even then she thought to betray me, as I had expected, but my ready fingers choked off her shriek before it could get started.

"Don't raise your voice," I said. "Now start talking."

"The third door to the right down the hall," she gasped. "There are guns in the desk drawer, and the key."

I shoved the gag back between her teeth. Noiselessly I let myself out into the hall and stood there. She was lying, of course; her first attempt would be to lead me into a trap. I heard sounds come from down the hall which froze my blood. No doubt the third room on the right was where the monsters had taken the women.

When I returned to the bedroom, Tala Mag's eyes widened with surprise. She had imagined that by now I would have walked into the monster's den.

I dropped down on the bed and struck a match. Her head wagged frantically, signalling that this time she would tell the truth. I ignored her; I could not afford to take another risk. I let the flame lick the bare soles of her feet. Her body tied up in a knot and whimpers dribbled through the gag.

Present I said: "If you fool me once again, I will return and set fire to the mattress."

I pulled out the gag. She had to clear her throat several times before words would come through. "In that dresser—a bunch of keys. One for the chains—another unlocks the room—across the way—a gunroom. It's the truth. Please, don't—don't torture me again."

"So you can't take it yourself!" I said, replacing the gag.

The bunch of keys were in the dresser drawer all right. I had to take the chance that they were the right ones. I

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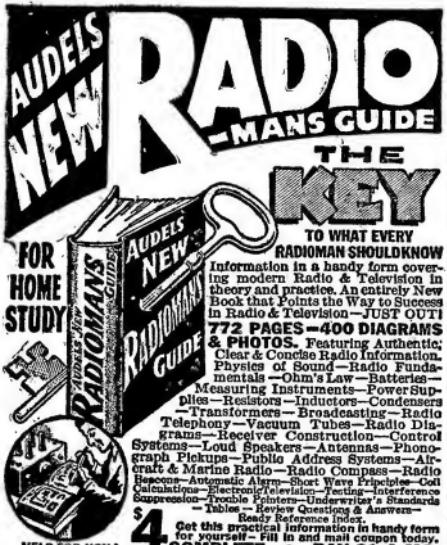
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stood over her and pointed to each key in turn. She nodded when I indicated the one for the chains and the one for the gunroom.

This time she hadn't dared to lie. No sound came through the door of the room across the hall. The key worked and I found myself in a cozily furnished den. Stuffed animals and fish were on the walls and on a rack were a dozen hunting rifles and shotguns. I selected five rifles, found cartridges to fit, and, burdened with the guns, went downstairs.

All the servants were occupied with the women. In the torture chamber I found the four men still in their chains and the horrible corpse of Inez Spaulding dangling from the ceiling. The men, knowing what was happening to their wives upstairs, seemed more dead than alive.

For a while they refused to believe the testimony of their eyes. But when I at last had them all free and was distributing the rifles, their expressions changed from hopeless to relentless thirst for vengeance.

"God, I want just one shot at them!" Victor Rooney exclaimed, stating what all of us felt.

"Hurry!" Frank Bord urged. "Our poor wives up there!"

We had to leave Bob Spaulding behind, because he would be no use to us. He crawled over to the dangling corpse of his wife and jabbered up at it. He was utterly mad.

I led the way to the upstairs room and kicked in the door. The other three crowded behind me, and momentarily we froze with horror.

THE four huge creatures were on the floor, each with one of our wives. In order to whet their bestial appetites they were toying with them, slobbering over their quivering bodies. And the women were still going through the futile motions of struggling, so that I

knew, with a lifting of my heart, that we had not arrived too late.

Emil was with my wife, and it was he who first became aware of our presence. Bellowing, he rose to his feet and charged at me like an enraged bull. I was ready and put a bullet in his massive chest before he was halfway across the room. And still he came on!

We had prepared our strategy while coming up the stairs. I slid away from the doorway and Cuyler took my place. His bullet dropped Emil. Then Rooney was in the doorway, his gun ready.

The servants were unarmed, and as they plunged toward the door one of us was always there to meet him with a bullet. By the time four bullets had been fired, it was again my turn at the door. In the interim I had reloaded my rifle. Two were dead and one wounded. The fourth, Wick, was crouching behind Lillian Bord, using her as a shield.

Our tactic had been calculated to keep our wives out of the line of our bullets. I dropped the wounded servant, then we advanced into the room. Wick screeched as we moved around his living shield. Then he reared up and got his mighty hands on Bord. He would have snapped Bord's head like a twig if Rooney hadn't jabbed the bore of his rifle up under Wick's chin and blasted away. The discharge almost lifted the monster's head off.

Each of us went hysterical then, snatching up his wife and crushing her to him. Suddenly Frank Bord cried out.

Naked, Tala Mag stood in the doorway. She had managed to free herself. In her hands was a double-barrelled shotgun. Her face was contorted with hate.

We had dropped our rifles. Both barrels of that shotgun could do frightful damage in the confines of the room. The final triumph, was, after all, Tala Mag's.

Her lips curled back over pointed

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